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Edna Broad

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White²

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERNISM IN AUSTRALIA (1850-1930)
AND THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION MADE BY WOMEN
THROUGH DOMESTIC DECORATION AND DESIGN

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award of
Master of Fine Arts (Research)

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FORM B

**UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA
CANDIDATE'S CERTIFICATE**

I certify that the exegesis entitled WHITE²

submitted for the degree of MASTER OF FINE ART (RESEARCH)

is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and
that this exegesis in whole or in part has not been submitted for an award
including a higher degree to any other university or institution

Signed:

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ABSTRACT

My research addresses the development of Modernism in Australia within the period c.1850 - 1930. The project focuses on the contribution made to this development by women through domestic decoration; and investigates the creative input of domestic needlework.

The research examines historical issues which were paramount to the emergence of Modernism led by women; defines those issues as they relate to Australian women artists; and discusses this Australian version of Modernism against a backdrop of European Modernism.

The visual component of my work explores through the medium of textile the irony of the relationship between yesterday's handmade needlework ethos and contemporary textile design and machine manufacturing processes.

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I am also indebted to Mrs Rosalie Smith for her informed commentary on the age, style and construction of needlework artefacts in my collection.

I also acknowledge the valuable information supplied to me by Mrs Betty Read of Bendigo, Victoria, as well as Mrs Pat Hocking of the Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society for her correspondence regarding early Bendigo rate records.

INTRODUCTION

My project views the role of Australian women in the development of Modernism through their own genre of domestic decoration and design in a defined time frame of 1850s-1930s. While a definition of Modernism is elusive, I have narrowed the scope to encompass what I consider to be the evolution of a particular kind of Australian Modernism promulgated by women and have compared its growth to a European model.

Part One of the exegesis traces the journey travelled by my great-grandmother, a dressmaker, who travelled from Tasmania to the Bendigo goldfields in the mid-1800s with her ex-convict parents. I wanted to address personal issues of female identity and important connections to needlework. My inspiration for this area of study was a collection of white needlework artefacts handed down through four Australian generations of women in my family. The anonymity and lack of documentation of the needlework prompted me to ask why it had not been considered important enough to be included as creative art.

Part Two focuses on research relating to the historical background of pioneer Australian women's creativity, beginning with stitch samplers. Visiting various museums, galleries and libraries, viewing clothing and needlework artefacts, I sought a definition of what creative expression was, at a time when Australian women's work contained a large component of 'making do' which saw them produce such utilitarian items as rag rugs and waggas.¹ The rag rug (Fig. 1) at

¹J. Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1997, pp.77-78. A 'wagga' was a woollen patchwork bedcover or 'woolly sandwich' and included some kind of sacking material, either corn sacks, wheat sacks or flour sacks.



Figure 1. Rag rug (maker unknown), Montrose Cottage, Victoria, (photographed by author, 1997)

Montrose Cottage in Ballarat, Victoria, was made from discarded clothing and fabric remnants as a functional item and perhaps served also as a canvas for women to embellish with decorative designs. Thus a culture of Australian women's folk art evolved out of poverty combined with a lack of appropriate materials, and their creativity was expressed in everyday functional items through the extension of decorative elements.

The development of Australian pioneer women's folk art in designing, making, stitching and decorating simple utilitarian objects for the home evolved into a 'making do' tradition which influenced women's domestic lives well into the 20th century.² The development of Australian women's art provided an equal contribution from both folk art and drawing and painting traditions transplanted from England by middle and upper class women. The Australian tradition of 'making do' prepared the way for women to embrace the arts and crafts movement, which in turn provided the impetus, training and encouragement for women to experiment in all areas of craft and art. The rudiments of Australian Modernism³ were developed in the early 1900s through a network of women artists initially from South Australia and New South Wales, who absorbed elements of Post-Impressionism.⁴ The arts and crafts movement shared similar

² 'Making do' began with pioneer women who with insufficient means and lack of new materials, made do with whatever was at hand such as worn-out clothing and sugar bags to produce useful household items. Eventually 'Waste not want not' became a virtue of thrift and economy.

³ Humphrey McQueen *The Black Swan of Trespass*, Alternative Publishing Cooperative, 1979 p.xii. In his Preface, McQueen takes a thematic approach examining how class conflict, the unconscious, science and landscape contributed to the particular contours of modernism in Australia.

⁴ H. Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism : Australian Women Artists 1900-1940*, Craftsman House G+B Arts International, NSW, 1996 p.59. Bernard Smith (*Australian Painting*, 1971, p.165) 'that the introduction of Post-Impressionism to the country owed much to women: Norah Simpson, Grace Cossington Smith, Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Isobel Tweddle, Dorrit Black, Ada Plante, Aletta Lewis, Vida Lahey and Mildred Lovett, to name only the more prominent'.

key terms such as 'design and decoration' with Post-Impressionism.⁵ The Arts and Crafts inspired revival in printmaking instigated a reappraisal of ancient techniques such as woodcuts⁶, and provided an ideal medium for experimentation in design principles, using the genre of still life.⁷ The rise in popularity of journals for the home coincided with the development of prints by Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black, Ethel Spowers and the watercolours of Thea Proctor, and their artwork was used in articles and as cover designs for magazines such as *The Home*. The images they produced were addressed predominantly to women, and complemented the magazine articles aimed at the home environment. This feminising face of modernism was not taken seriously as 'high art' at the time, but in a sense their work was subversive because although the subject matter was not confrontational it had a progressive modernist theoretical base, that paved the way for later more overtly Modernist art.

While these experiments were taking place in Australia, in Europe an aesthetic of Modernism - a machine aesthetic - was developing. Manifestos were published by Filippo Marinetti and Kasimir Malevich and sought to sweep the past decadence of the 19th century away and set the stage for new art.⁸ Alfred

⁵Topliss, 1996, p.100. The principles of Post-Impressionist art had a connection with the arts and crafts movement through key terms 'design and decoration' that artists such as Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor brought back from overseas in 1910.

⁶The influence of woodblock printing using Japanese techniques gained popularity in the 1890s in England, France, Germany and America. One technique involved brushing water-soluble colours onto the various blocks which produced subtle gradations of tones and transparency of colour.

⁷Topliss, 1996 p.100. The dedication to the art of still-life also related to the reappraisal of floral subject matter in design. Floral form was given preference because of its non-narrative character, as well as for the purely aesthetic values of design and decoration. Still-life painting lends itself to stylisation and abstraction, since it was essentially a decorative medium relying on colour and pattern.

⁸Jean-Louis Ferrier, (ed.), *Art of our Century*, Prentice Hall Press, New York, English transl.,

H. Barr Jr's 1936 chart (Fig.2) featured on the cover of his catalogue and essay for 'Cubism and Abstract Art', has a linear evolutionary narrative showing named art movements. The chart has one-way arrows and a central box entitled 'Machine Aesthetic' (placed around 1910) that connects in the diagram to all art movements and leads directly to Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism, the Bauhaus and Modern Architecture. Alfred Barr Jr is considered to be one of the architects of Modernist art history and his 1936 chronological chart and catalogue essay continued to be an influential critique of Modernist art history throughout the 20th century.⁹

Barr Jr's timeline covers a period in Europe which includes World War I and the turmoil of revolutionary Russia. A backlash against old world orders and a desire to wipe the slate clean with 'new structures' gave rise to such movements as Suprematism in Russia and the art of Kasimir Malevich.

Australia, on the other hand, did not experience any major political turmoil, and modern art which arose during this period appears imitative or derivative of European art. For instance, as late as 1912 in Australia, painters Roy de Maistre, Grace Cossington Smith and Norah Simpson were responding to a reproduction of a Cezanne painting; Margaret Preston was theorising on

1989, pp. 99, 158-159, 338-339. On 20 Feb. 1909 Filippo Marinetti's Futurist manifesto was published on the front page of *Le Figaro* newspaper proclaiming his love of danger, daring, courage, revolt and the beauty of *speed*. He wanted to glorify war, demolish museums and libraries, fight moralism and feminism. He likened museums to cemeteries. In 1915 Kasimir Malevich's Manifesto sought to promote pure living art transformed in the zero of form which he named 'Suprematism'.

⁹ Alfred Barr Jr's 1936 'Cubism and Abstract Art' catalogue and essay were reprinted in 1963 and 1975 in paperback form.

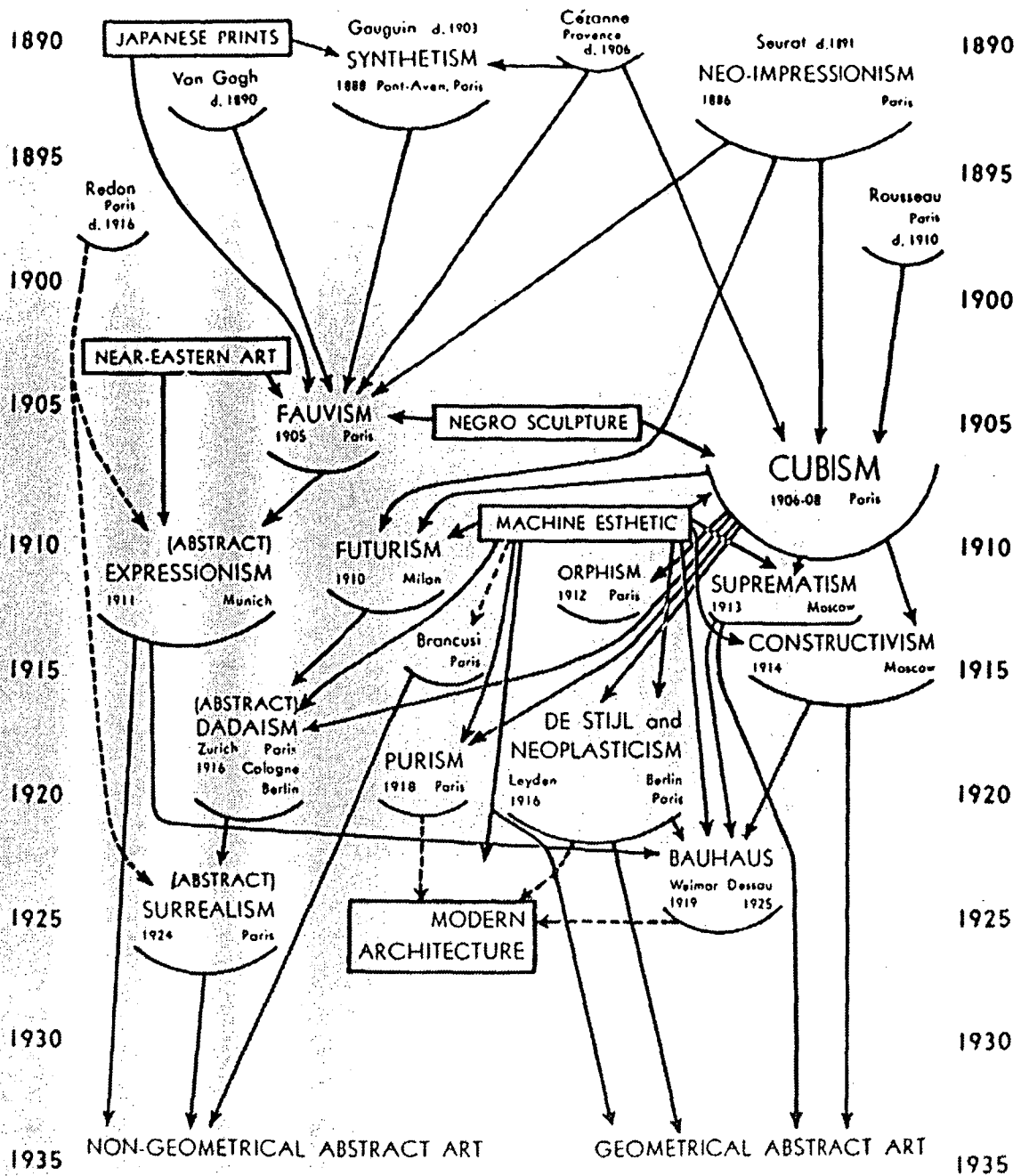


Figure 2. Cover design by Alfred Barr Jr for exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936), Museum of Modern Art, New York.

abstracting a still life to 'decoration' in her 1916 woodblock print *Still life and flowers* (Fig. 3), and in London in 1917 produced *Teapot with Boiling Billies and Gumtree Design* (Fig. 4). In 1915 Grace Cossington Smith produced *The Sock Knitter* (Fig. 5), often claimed as Australia's first Modernist painting.¹⁰

Part Three of my project examines the development of the artworks *White*² presented for exhibition. Of particular interest and influence on my work has been Russian artist Kasimir Malevich and his White on White series of paintings. His 1918 *Suprematist composition : White on White* (Fig. 6) was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936 as part of an historical survey in *Cubism and Modern Art* curated by Director, Alfred H. Barr Jr. (Fig. 2).

The basic format of my visual work begins with Malevich's white square, which he claimed to be 'a vivid and majestic newborn...the first step of pure creation in art'. The project presents a conjunction between stitch/textiles and the white void which Malevich proposed should displace any connection with nature. A cube and square, emblematic of the reductive strategy of the organising structures of modernism, encloses textile historically labelled as belonging to the sphere of women, and sets up a binary of cold/machine aesthetic versus soft/nature/nurture.

¹⁰McQueen, 1979, p.4. McQueen disputes the modernist label attributed to *The Sock Knitter* and believes that it is probably the earliest instance of imitation of surface characteristics still accepted as genuine Modernism in Australia. Further, he believes that the painting's closest model is Cezanne's *Madame Cezanne Sewing* (c.1877). My view is that *The Sock Knitter* makes a conscious statement on the role of women during World War I - knitting socks for Australian soldiers overseas.

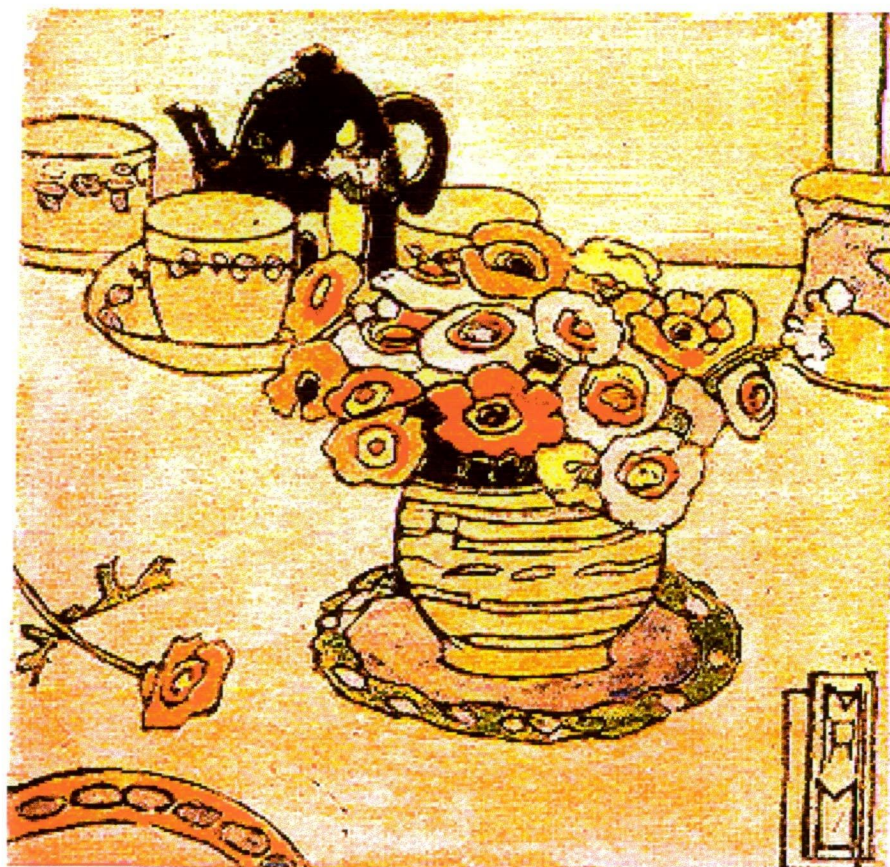


Figure 3. Margaret Preston *Still Life and Flowers*, 1916, woodblock print. Australian National Gallery.



Figure 4. Margaret Preston *Teapot with Boiling Billies and Gumtree Design*
1917, Art Gallery of New South Wales



Figure 5. Grace Cossington Smith *The Sock Knitter*, 1915, Art Gallery of New South Wales

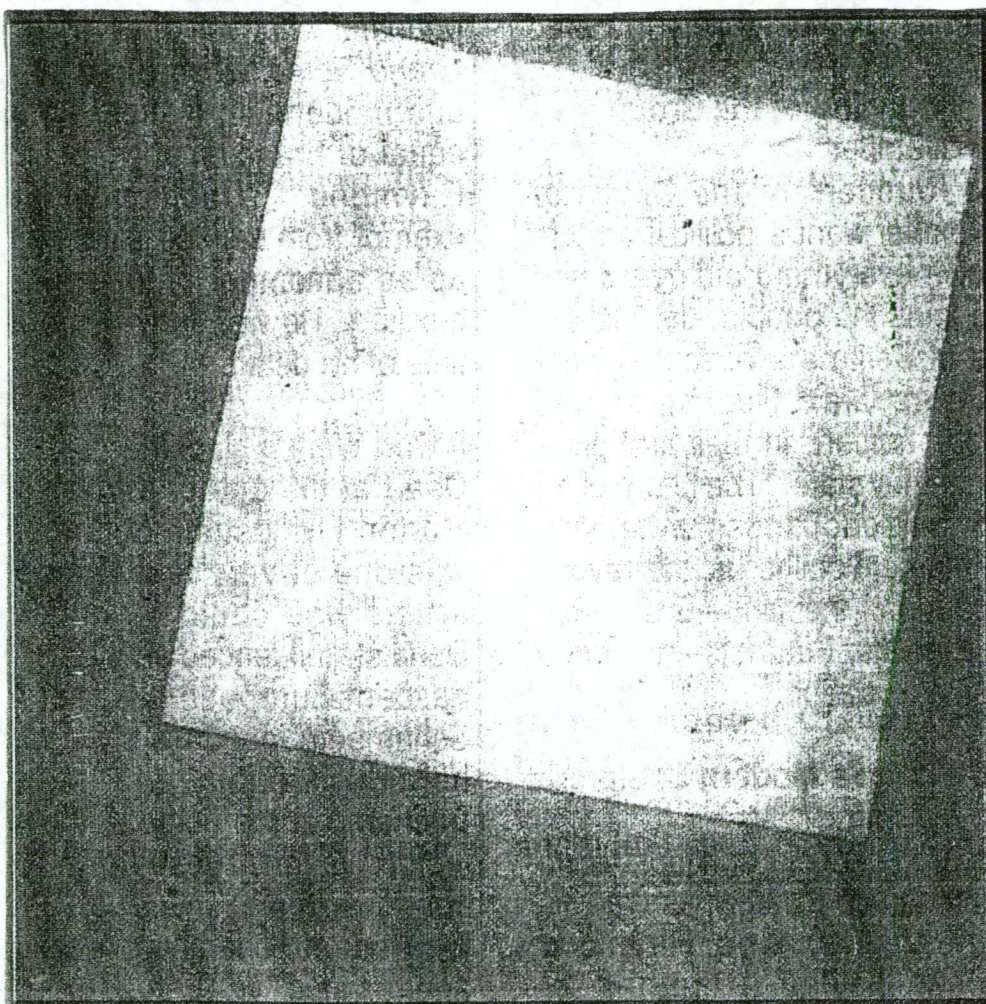


Figure 6. Kasimir Malevich *Suprematist Composition : White on White* 1918.
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Textile art as a contemporary 'fine art' discipline has been in existence since the 1960's, yet it still remains marginal. Textiles in the context of a heterogeneous art form is a field that is open to many approaches. Connected to the crafts through its historical background, function and vocabulary, textile art still has a 'common' touch lost to many fine artists as a result of the legacy of Modernism.

One of my considerations in using textile and stitch to make a body of work is that it represents a challenge as a medium. The short history of textile fine art has been built upon prescriptive thematic approaches and venturing too far beyond these parameters means negotiating a minefield of problems if the work is to be relevant.

One of the problems of textile as fine art is that it can too easily succumb to its own beauty which then negates its credibility. The form of textile/stitch that I use can only reference its own recent domestic history and therefore is seen in a different light to other Western art forms particularly painting which refers to its classical tradition.

JOURNEY

In 1997 while researching family history through genealogy, a marriage certificate of a Tasmanian-born maternal great-grandmother noted that her occupation was 'dressmaker'. Her occupation and the fact that she had been born in Tasmania of convict parents and travelled to the Victoria goldfields during the 19th century gold rush aroused my interest. I concluded that the journey of the family from Campbell Town, Tasmania, to the goldfields was taken also to begin a new life away from the convict 'stain'. This journey also had relevance to my own sense of identity relating to a convict background.

The issue of Australian convict culture is referred to by Miriam Dixon and specifically its effects on women and identity in Australia.¹ She describes women with convict backgrounds as being judged more harshly and carrying a stigma largely disproportionate to their crimes.

This stigma or 'stain' and its relevance to my own family created my desire to follow the journey taken by my great-grandmother (1835-1911), daughter of two transported English convicts, from Campbell Town, Tasmania, to the goldfields of Victoria during the gold rush era (c.1850-1860s). Her occupation was of great interest to me because it was about 'professional' as well as creative stitch.

My journey was made to see for myself the land where my family first staked a mining claim and to acknowledge that this was the official beginning of their settlement in Australia. It retraces a possible route taken by the family from

¹Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda - Women and Identity in Australia*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1978.

Campbell Town to the Victorian goldfields from Tasmania. Along the way I had also hoped to trace women's costumes and stitch artefacts of the period.

My great-grandmother Eliza Collis was born in Campbell Town, Tasmania in 1835. Her father had been transported for seven years in 1822 for poaching. Her mother Mary, transported in 1830, was given seven years for stealing a piece of beef, but served ten years before she received a free certificate in 1841.² At the time of the granting of her mother's freedom, Eliza was six years old.

The road they would have travelled was the old convict-built main road that linked Hobart Town with Launceston and took a different route than the present Heritage Highway. A map of early Van Diemen's Land and Dr Eric Ratcliff's illustrations both note the route from Hobart Town to Launceston with the inns, taverns and coaching houses which serviced the travellers along the road.³

The task of searching shipping records in the Public Records Office in Victoria to ascertain when the Collis family left Tasmania for Melbourne and the goldfields proved overwhelming and very time consuming. The spidery writing on the microfiche records was mostly incomprehensible. As I had no way of knowing which year to look for within the time span 1852-1863, or whether the family sailed from Hobart or Launceston, I had to abandon this task. The

²It was noted in her prison record that free certificate No. 161 was issued in 1841. A copy of this was unavailable. I have spoken with Tasmanian genealogical researchers who have never come across a 'Free Certificate' in their archival searches. I did obtain a photocopy of a free certificate dated 1858. Not surprisingly, the scarcity of these certificates in the archives could be explained by most people in the 19th century not wanting to keep a certificate which named them or a member of their family as an ex-convict.

³G. Hawley Stancombe and Eric Ratcliff *Highway in Van Diemen's Land*, Glendessary, Western Junction, sponsored by the National Trust of Australia (Tasmania), 1974.

amount of sea traffic in those years was at a peak because of the gold discoveries within Australia. As a result I decided that this could well be a research project on its own.

My journey to Melbourne on the 'Spirit of Tasmania' and the approach to Port Melbourne would have been rather similar to that of 150 years ago, but then, according to contemporary records, the sailing ships anchored out in deeper water while the small pilot boats brought the passengers perhaps to Liardet's Jetty. In the 1850s a tent city sprang up where prospective gold seekers sought supplies, equipment and transport to the various gold fields.

In the diary of a young girl, Lucy Hannah Birchall ⁴, she writes of her journey to the Bendigo goldfields in the winter of 1855 and mentions that of the seven day 100 mile journey, in the winter of 1855, she walked half-way and rode on the dray the other. Her diary entries give a good description of the route taken by goldseekers and it was her diary notes, in conjunction with a Victorian road map and an old map of the goldfields, that I followed on the way to Bendigo.⁵

With material and maps obtained from La Trobe Library, Melbourne and the Public Records Office, Laverton, my plan was to follow the route to Bendigo and find the actual piece of land where my family had lived.

From information on a marriage certificate a location address was noted. In 1864, Eliza Collis, dressmaker, aged 29, married an Englishman from Plymouth,

⁴ Lucy Hannah Birchall ...Manuscript - An Account of a Journey from Melbourne in July 1855 Written to her Grandmother by Lucy Hannah Birchall (with accompanying letter). La trobe Library, Melbourne.

⁵ Frances Hale, *Wealth Beneath The Soil*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1981 (map frontispiece).

Devon, named Charles Henry Corrie, a miner aged 27. The ceremony was performed at the Collis Residence, Sheepshead, Bendigo.

My next step was to find where 'Sheepshead' was. All the references of places around Bendigo mentioned only 'Sheepwash', but at the Public Records Office, Laverton, I found an old Department of Mines map showing the Bendigo goldfields.⁶ This map revealed that Sheepshead was a reef line with approximately 20 or more other reef lines that ran parallel across the entire Bendigo region and this proved very useful because it noted the location of the railway line and names of the many gold mines dotted along the reefs. By looking at large present-day street maps I was able to work out roughly which streets came within the Sheepshead line of reef.

Further information came to light from old Bendigo rate notices obtained from the Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society with a record dated 1863. William Collis of Sheepshead Gully paid 12 pounds rates for Crown Land with a house. His son John (miner) registered in 1864-1866 house and land, also at Sheepshead Gully, paying 25 pounds. He also registered a mining lease at Sheepshead Reef from 1867-1880 at 12 pounds. Charles Henry Corrie, Eliza's husband, also took Crown Land and added a dwelling at Sheepshead Gully from 1865-1880, at a cost of 12 pounds per year.⁷ It is interesting to note that by 1875 Charles Corrie was noted as Mine Manager, paying 28 pounds rates on land and house.

⁶A. V. Palmer, *The Gold Mines of Bendigo*, Craftsman Press, Victoria, 1975.

⁷Further records were not available beyond 1880, because at that time they had not been transferred from the original rate records.

Information from voters' rolls for the City of Bendigo show in 1898-99 that Eliza Collis resided at Sheepshead Reef as 'owner'. The 1910 roll noted she was a widow and the owner of house and land in Belle Vue Road (no number). My assumption then was that the part of Sheepshead that I was looking for was Belle Vue Road. A member of the Genealogical Society explained that about 1903-1904 only the owners were entitled to vote and not the occupiers. Houses were not numbered until about 1909-1912 and since then the numbering system has changed.

From the electoral roll of Golden Square, Bendigo, for 1903, it was noted that residing at Belle Vue Road were Eliza Corrie, her eldest daughter Louisa Corrie, sister-in-law Alice Collis and nephew William John Collis, eldest son of Eliza's brother John.

It was with a stroke of luck, after much searching and walking for kilometres around what used to be mullock heaps, that I met an elderly lady, Mrs Betty Read, in Belle Vue Road, Golden Square. She asked me who I was looking for and I replied that my family had lived somewhere in the Belle Vue Road area from 1863 until the mid 1920's. On relating their names Mrs. Read said that she knew of the Corrie family, as she and her parents had lived there in the street at No.51 all their lives. She was able to show me the place where the house had been, which was only two houses away from her house, and remarked that it was only pulled down about 20 years ago which corresponded with the 1970s style house standing in its place. Mrs Read later wrote to me on 5 December, 1997 giving me the information that I needed to confirm that I had found the spot I had been looking for. (Fig. 7). She wrote :



Figure 7. Belle Vue Road, Bendigo, site of Collis/Corrie home 1863-1920s (photographed by author, 1997).

I have spoken to the people who built a new house there ...they cut the mulberry tree down to make room for a shade house and work shed. In those days the number as far as I can gather would have been around 200 or so. Yes the old house was made of mud brick, nearly all were in those days. I am the oldest one living up here. Belle Vue Road was well known for the mines. Just about every man worked in them as there was little else for them to do.

Later, in 1997, I spoke with my 84 year-old mother and related that I had found the place where her grandmother had lived and she surprised me by saying.

I lived in grandmother's house in Belle Vue Road until I was about six years old...I was told that at first there was a fair bit of land at the front and back of the house and along the back of the fence Chinese had dug holes mining (they never covered them up...they were dangerous). I remember there was a large mulberry tree in the backyard that I used to climb. I used to feed the mulberry leaves to my silkworms. There were two big Moreton Bay fig trees, one on either side of the front gate and a peppercorn tree I used to sit in. I remember the mullock heaps along our road that were left over from mining.⁸

My mother also enlarged on her grandmother Eliza Corrie's skills as a dressmaker from information related to her by her own mother :

She was a very good dressmaker - she made clothing for the elite of Bendigo. She had to earn money after her husband died at age 58 [in

⁸ From interviews with my mother during 1997 at her home in Mowbray, Launceston.

1896] after he came back from a trip to Borneo where he had contracted a tropical disease.

Eliza's fortunes had improved considerably from her early life in Campbell Town and on the marriage certificate of her eldest son Barclay (my grandfather) in 1895, she had lengthened her name to Elizabeth and her husband Charles had noted his occupation as 'Gentleman'. Her convict heritage was to be buried until I rediscovered it by accident during genealogical research in 1996.

Eliza's father William Collis died in 1874 aged 87. Her mother Mary died in 1881 aged 84 and both are buried at Bendigo. They survived transportation to Van Diemen's Land, separation from their spouses and children in England, and met and married and made a new life for themselves and their children on the goldfields of Bendigo.

Ultimately, it was through Eliza's talents as a dressmaker that she had supported herself, firstly when she arrived on the goldfields as a young woman and in later life as a widow when her financial circumstances were reduced.

Eliza's skills would have been in demand in Bendigo where a social hierarchy arose based on wealth associated with gold speculation. English Victorian etiquette dictated the importance of appearance, of dressing correctly for all occasions. In the absence of ready-made clothing, skilled dressmakers were valued for their ability to make the latest styles in women's garments such as riding habits, evening gowns, morning gowns, suits, blouses, underwear, etc. A woman's elegant well-made gown projected the social status, wealth or position in society of her husband or father.

THEN AND NOW

*'We must look to the future...because women in art have no past'*¹

History imparts knowledge of the past, making the present more easily understood. In the case of the histories of women over the last 200 years, the domestic space evolved through social, political and economic structures. As such, stitch has been an integral part of the domestic space of women.

Domesticity is an invention of the modern age and according to Walter Benjamin it was in the early 1800s 'for the first time the living space became distinguished from the space of work'.² The values that make up domesticity - separation from the workplace, privacy, comfort, focus and family life are a part of the modern age. Domesticity is a product of capital economics, technological advances and Enlightenment ideas of individuality. However, the 'art' that emerged during the formation of the modern age was not related to domestic imagery or objects from the home because it was obscured by the 19th century invention of the avant garde. The avant garde artist did not want to be at home. Home was the place allocated to women where they had private pastimes, and being undomestic in the public arena served as a guarantee of art production as a professional. The avant garde artists and

¹ cited from 'The Argus' newspaper October 10, 1935. J. Peers, *More than Just Gumtrees*, Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors in association with Dawn Revival Press, 1993, p. 81.

²C. Reed, *Not at Home*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1996 - cites Walter Benjamin 'Louis-Phillipe or the Interior' *Charles Baudelaire A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London Verso, 1973), p. 167.

architects asserted their accomplishments through contrasts with domesticity, at least since Charles Baudelaire's defence of Impressionism in his 1859 essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' where the modernist painter was cast as a 'flaneur', 'a man of the crowd' who curses the hours he must spend indoors, unless it was at a night club, the opera or a cafe.

The various forms and methods of stitch that have developed in Australia originated with emigrant women and evolved to suit the Australian domestic environment. Most had no opportunity to paint or draw but almost all women sewed in one form or another and their needlework was a form of expression and creativity which also provided them with a social network. Dressmaking was very much part of the domestic sphere of women and by the second half of the 19th century it was an occupation and a profession for many women, as ready-made clothes were not as available as they are today, and women's clothing was intricately constructed and required skill to produce. For the working class it was common to have only one set of 'Sunday clothes' which were worn on special occasions and to church.

During this period, the kind of clothing that women wore followed the figure closely and fit was an important element of fashion, especially in bodices, coats and jackets. Some styles had exaggerated shaping and the complex construction would have been beyond the capabilities of an amateur. As a result there was a need for skilled and creative dressmakers, for women who could cut and style clothing to achieve a good fit in clothing.

In 1880, Madame Weigel showed her paper patterns at the Great International Exhibition in Melbourne. Her fashion publications and her paper pattern service broke new ground in Australia. Up until then there had been no Australian published source for the domestic needlewoman.

Weigel's Journal of Fashion was published in Richmond, Victoria, and cost six shillings for a yearly subscription. Madame Weigel also produced a catalogue of fashions for threepence from which numbered paper patterns could be chosen. It is interesting to note from illustrations of these patterns that bodices, sleeves and skirts are all numbered separately.³ These patterns could also have been used by women to convey their choice of costume to their local dressmaker to make up for them. The lady of high fashion still had her clothes imported or custom-made by skilled dressmakers.

The Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, Tasmania, houses a collection of women's 19th century clothing and when I inspected the adult clothing which dated from around mid-Victorian to early Edwardian eras I noticed how very small they were approximately size 6 - 8 in today's measurements. A large number of separate pieces of fabric made up the bodice of dresses and jackets and the elaborate arrangement of the bustle draping at the back of garments required correct draping of the fabric to achieve a good fit. Fashions of this era had closely fitting bodices, jackets and sleeves and even though the gowns were small, a large amount of fabric was required to make them (perhaps 5 - 8 yards). The method used to make

³ M. Fletcher, *Costume in Australia 1788-1901*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1984 (inside cover pages).

the costumes was economical : every small piece of fabric was carefully accounted for, with pieces added on or seams let out where it was not visible from the outside of the garment. The intricacy of the designs and the detailed finishing of the garments, with pleats, flounces, ruching, covered buttons, hook and eye closings, pleating, pocket flaps, handstitched linings, braiding, tasselling, bustle attachments, padding and secret pockets, revealed the time and effort and numerous fittings required by dressmakers to complete such figure hugging and complex gowns. The fabrics used in the clothing were of fine silks with cotton linings.

After having viewed those period gowns in the Queen Victoria Museum collection, I had a better understanding of the type of clothing worn by ordinary women and their families. The Holtermann collection of photographs taken at the Hill End and Gulgong, NSW, goldfields in 1872 show women posed, perhaps in their Sunday best, outside their homes, tents and businesses.⁴ Two of the women standing on a respectable-looking verandah are wearing jackets and skirts with multiple frills on the bottom as well as elaborate ribboned bonnets. Others, with their children outside wattle and daub houses or tents, are hatless and wear plain long dresses of sombre colours. One woman wears a striking checked dress, while her two daughters wear plaid skirts. Another photograph shows a woman standing at her front gate. Above her head is her shingle, 'Mrs. Deighton, Dressmaker'. The sign is quite large and probably canvas, tied to the bark

⁴ K. Burke *Gold and Silver : An Album of Hill End and Gulgong Photographs From the Holtermann Collection*, Heineman, Melbourne, 1973.

and sapling roof. The paling picket fence is neatly cut and made from saplings and there are curtains at both the front windows. The sapling posts that hold up the verandah are encircled with climbing plants.⁵

Examples of goldfields memorabilia, including domestic artefacts such as sewing implements, cooking and cleaning utensils and women's clothing, are exhibited at Montrose Cottage, Ballarat. A simple dress of red plaid material, with multiple bound edge flounces (frills) on the bottom of the skirt and sleeves with a white collar on the bodice, along with an apron, bonnet and boots are on display. The flounces and white collar on the dress suggest it was probably a 'Sunday best' dress. For working women around the diggings, a frilled skirt would be an impediment to chores as well as a mud and dust collector. The white collar was probably detachable to be kept or worn with other dresses. The pintucked white bonnet with a neck flap (bavolet) is of the kind seen in illustrations of the goldfields such as S. T. Gill and W. Strutt's watercolour *The Girls the Diggers left behind them* (1851-52).

At Sovereign Hill Working Goldmine Museum in Ballarat, Victoria, staff wear contemporary reproduction clothing which gives an approximate idea of clothing styles of that era. The predominant style shows tightly fitted bodices, pintucked and braided, flounced skirts and sleeves with flounces similar to

⁵Mrs. Jane Deighton's home in Chapel Street, Gulgong, 1872, in K. Burke, 1973, p.154.

the clothing women were wearing in the photographs of the Holterman collection when posing in their best clothes.

The Ballarat Fine Art Gallery has the remnants of the Eureka flag, considered to be the earliest Australian communal artwork and allegedly made by women on the goldfields. The Eureka flag was first flown as the standard of the Ballarat Reform League on 29 November 1854. No one really knows who designed the flag but it is thought that a Canadian worker named Ross, who died of wounds four days after the battle, was responsible. In his book *The Eureka Stockade*, Raffaello Carboni records that Captain Ross of Toronto was the 'bridegroom of the flag'. The story is that Ross probably obtained some of the material from a tent maker and asked several local women, the wives of miners, to make the flag. It is suggested that the white cross on the flag was made from petticoats and that it was made to crinoline size. This fits within the 'making do' ethos of women of the time. The stitching around the stars is blanket stitch and there is the remains of white edging with cord. Restoration of the flag by Mrs Val D'Angri, great-grand-daughter of one of the flag makers, Anastasia Withers, revealed it to be made of woollen mohair fabric possessing a silky sheen. The stars were constructed of a transparent 'petticoat' lawn. It is believed that because the five stars are so irregularly sewn women, not professional flag makers, made the flag.⁶ I find this assertion difficult to understand, considering the early training that most women had in needlework.

⁶ From notes issued by the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, Victoria, 1997.

Laurel Johnson believes that three women, Anastasia Withers, Anne Duke and Anastasia Hayes sewed the Eureka flag.⁷ She notes that Anastasia Withers owned the first sewing machine in the Ararat area. It was a Grover and Baker model, which used one thread and created a 'chain' effect on the underside when stitching.

Rafael Carboni wrote of the flag in 1855 :

*There is no flag in Europe or in the civilised world half so beautiful...the flag is silk, blue-ground with a large silver cross, no device or arms but all exceedingly chaste and natural.*⁸

The restored but damaged flag is now the property of the City of Ballarat.

A liberating effect on domestic art work was the general availability and cheapness of white cotton. This occurred around 1850 when women of all classes were able to take up fancywork, particularly crochet. By far the most common handmade item to be kept and handed down in families is crocheted and usually white. Most of the objects they made were hidden - seen only by their family or friends and visitors and kept in bottom drawers. The history of Australian women's domestic and decorative arts is therefore largely unknown. Pattern books and needlework have not been collected and therefore very little information, even from recent times, has survived. There

⁷ L. Johnson, *Women of Eureka*, Brown Door Publications, Ballara, Victoria, 1995.

⁸ From notes issued at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, Victoria 1997

are histories available on Art Embroidery and other styles of needlework produced for the use and consumption by the church and ruling class; however, there has been virtually no documentation until recently on the history of needlework produced by middle and working class women for use in the Australian home.⁹

The white needlework handed down in my family consists of:

- Camisole-drawers with bobbin lace 'combination' insertions and 'Torchon' lace made on Princess looms. These insertions combine hole stitch and twist, and three legged spider (mid to late Victorian)
- Half bloomers - bobbin lace with rose ground, tallies, hole stitch, chevrons, hole stitch and twist, with half stitch diamond pattern. Consists of insertion and edging, with 2 straight edges, one insertion. (mid-late Victorian).
- A bed setting edging of filet crochet of sheet edging and insertion and pillow edging, (Edwardian).
- a table runner of filet crochet, (Edwardian)
- a square supper cloth of motif filet crochet (Edwardian)
- Needle lace camisole with machine made lace. Some seams hand sewn (Edwardian style)
- Tablecloth from Mary Card design book of filet crochet (1900-1910).
- Doily of cutwork in Richilieu, (1920-30)
- Sauce bottle cover with 'Sauce' in filet crochet pattern (1930s)

⁹ J. Isaacs, *The Gentle Art*, Lansdowne, Sydney, NSW 1997 p.120

- Set of three doilies and tablecloth using Irish Rose design (1930s).¹⁰

In 1979 in Sydney an important investigation of women's domestic needlework took place. The culmination of this was the D'oyley Show. The presenters of the show, The Women's Domestic Needlework Group, traced the designs of Australian doily designs with emphasis on filet crochet and crochet from the late 19th century to 1939. Their aim was to address the imbalance in art history with its undervaluation of women's domestic fancywork.

The background to the making of crochet lace begins probably in 19th century Ireland and was brought to Australia with the first Irish settlers. According to Jennifer Isaacs, crochet lace made with a hook, originated as a quicker and more portable alternative to lace made on a pillow with bobbins and came about as a means for poor Irish women to earn money. Irish lace crochet was used to make collars, cuffs and yokes for dresses and children's clothes and many edgings for clothes and household linen. Accessories of lace collars, cuffs and hems were often reserved for 'best clothing', and were removed and replaced on new articles or stored, until they were used again.

Mending and altering clothing was an accepted part of dressmaking and for the working class woman, worn-out clothing was not thrown away, but

¹⁰ I consulted Rosalie Smith of Invermay, Launceston on 18/10/99. She is a practitioner lacemaker and makes bobbin lace and does tatting often sourcing old pattern books for her work. I sought her knowledge on styles and patterns used by early Australian lace and crochet makers to identify and date the white work in my collection.

recycled into something else such as floor rugs, quilts, linings, fillings or aprons. Even when this frugality was no longer a necessity, the habit of re-using materials had become entrenched in the Australian way of life, resulting in the 'making do' philosophy which continued through the 1930s and 1940s. Even up until the mid 1960s, the Royal Melbourne Show in Victoria had a section for 'Objects made from a sugar bag'.

In Australia, important developments for women arose in the early 1900s, with the emancipation movement and the English-inspired arts and crafts movement, both of which had great influence on Australian women's creative practice. The emancipation movement allowed greater freedom for women, including overseas travel, and the arts and crafts movement refined the existing domestic 'making do' homespun craft ethos that had sprung from a pioneering past.

The arts and crafts movement which evolved in Australia was inspired initially by John Ruskin and followed through by William Morris. Women embroiderers associated with the company established by William Morris, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. were assigned to embroider work designed by artists such as Burne Jones, William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, thus narrowing the gap between art and craft. The arts and crafts movement, aligned with the aesthetic movement, revalued craft objects; this cooperation between art and craft eventually led to a new aesthetic, as promoted by Clive Bell and Roger Fry in the 1920s.

This revaluation of the decorative object as being worthy of aesthetic contemplation provided part of the modernist reinterpretation of art and was completely compatible with women artists who traditionally had been associated with the 'lower' subjects in the academic hierarchy of art, such as still life, landscape painting and the crafts.

Roger Fry wrote in 1908 :

*Much that is usually classed as merely decorative in aim is really profoundly expressive of emotional content.*¹¹

The arts and crafts movement spread knowledge of craft techniques and gradually improved Australian design standards, brought about the establishment of Australia's first indigenous craft movement, and formed the basis of studio craft tradition in Australia.¹²

The theories of the movement by John Ruskin and promoted by William Morris found their own way to Australia through illustrated magazines such as '*The Studio*'. This magazine, in particular, attracted so much interest that its contents were published in local periodicals. The principles of the

¹¹ Topliss, 1996, p.100.

¹² Caroline Miley, (Curator) *Beautiful and Useful - The Arts and Crafts Movement in Tasmania*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 1987, Launceston, Tasmania., p.51. The arts and crafts movement affected the development of studio craft in Australia in four main ways. First, it popularised the concept of the artist-craftsman, without which studio craft cannot exist. Second, it improved the standard of design and execution in applied art and introduced or revived little-known techniques. In connection with this, the movement had a considerable impact on technical and art education. Thirdly, the emphasis on originality and self-expression combined with the use of Australian motifs generated our first indigenous craft movement and style.

movement included : close association of designer and maker - a reliance on traditional handicrafts which saw the revival of ancient craft techniques, such as dyeing with natural dyes, woodblock printing, book binding, and printing; a desire to express the construction of an art object; faithfulness to the material of which an object is made; fitness of design to function; avoidance of meticulous finish for its own sake; and the use of appropriate motifs.

Along with *The Studio* journal widely available in Australia, which spread the ideas of the English arts and crafts movement, financially independent Australian women went to London and enrolled in various courses. They were quickly influenced by the arts and crafts movement and brought its philosophies back to Australia, introducing them into their work. There were several groups of women who were involved in the arts and crafts societies in London: working class or peasant women, who became employed in the revival of traditional rural crafts; aristocratic upper and middle class women with leisure time, who organised the working class and peasant women, taught them rural craft revivals, and employed destitute gentlewomen who, forced by circumstances, began to make a living in workshops or as freelancers; and perhaps the most influential in the long run, the elite inner circle of educated middle class women, who worked with the key male figures within the vanguard of the movement. In Australia, this latter group dominated exhibitions and acted as office bearers of arts and crafts societies.

These arts and crafts societies were established in every State during the first decade of the 20th century. Victoria had the first arts and crafts magazine

published in 1895; Tasmania had the first Arts and Crafts Society, founded in 1903 in Hobart.

Usually the arts and crafts societies had a central theme to 'encourage and assist the development and the use of Australian materials and motifs in work and design'. Gumnuts, cicadas, waratahs, wattle, kookaburras and kangaroos decorated everything in the arts and crafts repertoire from embroidered cushions to stencilled curtains, leatherwork, metalwork and prints. Many of the members of these societies worked in a variety of mediums, for instance Tasmanian Vera Whitesides was a china painter, made raffia and leather work, and also did wood carving and metalwork. This spread of skills continued the tendency of 19th century women to employ their creativity in multiple decorative arts.

Another significant influence on ordinary women in the rural craft revival in Australia was the introduction of the Country Women's Association (CWA), although individual craftswomen were often members of both arts and crafts societies as well as the CWA from the mid-1920s.

Crafts that were popular in the 19th century amongst women were ribbon embroidery, hairpin crochet and point lace. In the 'making do' Australian women's tradition, they made waggas (a woollen bed quilt, or woolly sandwich) using patchwork wool scraps with discarded woollen clothing for filling rag rugs from discarded clothing and scraps of textile, knitted bedspreads, and wove fibre hats and made baskets from many plant

materials, including dried corn husks. Pattern books were available for some of the items. Schoolgirls made samplers in stitch in preparation for their adult work.

The first major exhibition of women's work was held at the Melbourne Exhibition buildings in 1907 and covered needlework, cookery, laundry, arts, music and horticulture. Work from all States was exhibited. In Castlemaine, Victoria The Buda Folk museum where the Leviny family lived from 1863-1981, contains the work of Hilda, Kate and Dorothy Leviny who participated in The First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work in 1907 and their original entries are held at Buda. This work includes enamelling, metalwork, embroidery, needlework, drawing, painting and pottery and remains as a representative record of the arts and crafts movement in Victoria.

Kate Leviny was responsible for collecting the works of modern printmakers such as Margaret Preston, which hang on the walls at Buda. With her sister Mary, Kate was involved in the establishment of the Castlemaine Art Gallery in 1913 in a building donated from the estate of their father, Ernest Leviny.

From the early 1900s, through the influences of the arts and crafts movement, many women artists became involved in printmaking - then considered an inferior medium when compared to oil painting. The late 19th century revival of interest in woodcuts drew upon such diverse traditions as Japanese printmaking, folk prints and 16th century Italian book illustrations. Margaret

Preston's woodblock print *Still Life and Flowers* (Fig. 3) reflects Japanese techniques. It is close in style to that of the work of the English Omega artists, Fry, Grant and Bell.¹³ She studied Japanese prints at the Musée Guimet in 1912 which led to a re-evaluation of her aims and influenced her work in simplification of line, and use of colour.¹⁴ The woodblock print technique which Preston began experimenting with used woodblocks cut along the grain, as well as endgrain blocks. By 1925 she had begun using Tasmanian huon pine prepared for her by a Sydney patternmaker. The woodblocks usually between three and six inches were glued together to form larger blocks. She produced more prints by this technique than any other printmaking method.¹⁵

Margaret Preston's first recorded exhibition of woodcuts is thought to have been in 1914, while she was living in England. Her predominant interest in still life developed through these experiments and, combined with her use of Australian flower imagery, provided a distinctive design base which was entirely in keeping with commercial domestic interior design.

By the 1920s artists such as Margaret Preston, Ethel Spowers, and Thea Proctor had their prints and watercolours prominently featured in cover designs of magazines such as *The Home*, a women's magazine. *Art in*

¹³R. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston*, Melbourne Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, p52.

¹⁴Butler, 1987, p. 40.

¹⁵Butler,, 1987,pp. 52-54.

Australia, a specialty magazine on Australian art, played an important role in creating an image for Modernism in Sydney between the wars.¹⁶ Margaret Preston's and Thea Proctor's work was chosen to represent Modernism and both were promoted at different times by having a special issue of *Art in Australia* dedicated to them. Caroline Jordan believes that the conservative magazine *Art in Australia* selectively promoted modernism as marginal, decorative feminine practice, using Preston's and Proctor's work.¹⁷ I would disagree with this particular point because both Preston and Proctor had achieved reasonable success through exhibitions of their prints and paintings before being promoted by Sydney Ure Smith's publications, and it was just as much because of this success that they were promoted, and their work made available to a larger audience.¹⁸

The art of Margaret Preston fitted well into the sphere of women's work because of her emphasis on still life and Australian flower painting. She was an enthusiastic exponent of the arts and crafts movement and studied pottery in England at the Camberwell School of Art and Craft in 1916. Margaret Preston was unusual in the Australian context in the sense that her art was

¹⁶C. Jordan, 'Designing women: Modernism and its representation in *Art in Australia*' *Strange Women*, ed. Jeanette Hoon, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 28. The conservative magazine *Art in Australia* was ruled by a small clique, for instance Sydney Ure-Smith was publisher and editor of both *The Home* and *Art in Australia* and was a trustee of the Art Gallery of NSW. Other members of this clique were Lionel Lindsay and J. S. MacDonald

¹⁷C. Jordan *Strange Women* ed. Jeanette Hoon, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1994, pp.28-37. These special issues were : Margaret Preston Issue, 22, 3 December 1927; Thea Proctor Issue, 43, 15 April 1932.

¹⁸Butler, 1987, *The Prints of Margaret Preston*, pp. 307-321; 323-325. This comment is based on the considerable number of exhibitions of Preston's work and publications relating to her work prior to this promotion.

based on a well-researched understanding of Modernism. She said of her craft work :

*Whenever I thought that I was slipping in my art, I went into crafts - wood-cuts, monotypes, stencils, and etchings...*¹⁹

She deliberately chose her use of elements of floral and domestic subjects in order to explore early Modernism and in that sense demonstrates the link of a domestic genre between early creative 'low' art of pioneer women and the development of modern art in Australia.

Meanwhile in Europe prior to World War I there was a spontaneous development in art which 'was a complete rejection of realism (naturalism)²⁰ in art, and an attempt to establish an art of pure form reinforced by rapidly increasing mechanisation - thus producing a machine aesthetic. The machine was and continues to be a universal cogent symbol of our age in one form or another. In 1915 in Moscow a group of architects, engineers and painters named themselves Suprematists.²¹ Beginning with a simple revolt against pre-industrial easel painting, their new medium was steel, their method was construction in space, both dynamic and seemingly functional, with expressive qualities of an efficient machine. However, the art produced by the Suprematists during the pre-revolutionary years (1913-1917), arose

¹⁹Topliss, 1996, p.135

²⁰H. Read, *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, Faber & Faber, London, 1964. Read notes the ambiguity of the word 'realism' when used in the aesthetics of art. To avoid the ambiguity, another word *naturalism* is used but it also is ambiguous because of its 19th century connotations of 'normal' or 'average', but which does not include those realistic styles in art which are anything but naturalistic (e.g. expressionism).

²¹Kasimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo

from a united action against the old established academic order.

Post-revolution (1918-1922) saw further developments and crystallisation of the ideals of the Suprematists in the manifesto of Constructivism. But with the rise to power of the Communist Party and the restoration of the old order of pictorial realism, the struggle to express contemporary values in art had to begin again.

An Australian version of modern art developed slowly. After World War I Australia turned inwards and a period began which was founded on fear of overseas 'foreign' contamination, as expressed in isolationist, protectionist and anti-alien policies (e.g. The White Australia Policy) and laws which were to endure through until the middle 1930s.

The creation of the Anzac legend during World War I, the back-to-the-land movement of 1919 and notions of racial superiority were reactionary and anti-modern. Art that conformed to these values included the work of Arthur Streeton and Hans Heysen which evoked a nostalgic agrarian dreamtime of the 1890s; Australian pioneers of post-impressionism such as Grace Cossington-Smith were ignored until many decades later.

John F. Williams believes that the development of the male Anzac legend and the mythologising of the 'bush' post-World War I, together with isolationism and the denigration of European art as decadent and alien by the power elite, were some reasons young men deserted the art schools, allowing young women to make a disproportionate contribution to the development of

interwar art.²² Women artists played a greater part in forming contemporary taste in Australia than they have before or since. However, these women, despite their numbers, their talents and their contribution to art, were controlled by an older generation male art Establishment. This dominant Edwardian clique - conservative, Imperial-minded and anti-modern - controlled art culture for almost two decades, probably because of the absence of younger men variously described as the 'lost generation' or 'the generation lost' to challenge them.²³

As late as 1933 during the Depression, which naturally affected the arts, arch-conservative J. S. MacDonald, Director of the National Gallery of Victoria created a stir in the press when he delivered a lecture in which he attacked women and modern art, making a statement that modern art was the result of a conspiracy between incompetent women artists and 'pansies'.²⁴

He also wrote a year later :

²²J. F. Williams, *Quarantined Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp 4-6.

²³ Williams, 1995, p. 226. The idea of the lost generation of the Great War is rooted in Social Darwinism; only the best volunteer for war, the best die first, unselfishly, and society loses only the very best of its menfolk. Robert Hughes claims that a Picasso of England may lie on the battlefields of the Somme. Williams notes that Bernard Smith proposes a similar idea and points to Australia's 60,000 dead and 226,000 casualties in World War I as a reason for the cultural cringe and the generation of young men missing from art schools from 1913 for two decades.

²⁴A 'pansy' was Australian slang for an effeminate man. It is ironic that this should refer to a flower (Pansy - 'heartsease').

...for two generations women have flooded the [art] schools ...yet they haven't learned to paint in any numbers, they learned to make patterns, 'make-up designs' and the like.²⁵

These derogatory and reactionary statements by J. S. MacDonald were both insulting and ironically complimentary to women. He was insulting to women in that he believed they could not paint pictures reflecting the prevailing conservative subject matter reserved for men and that they could only produce decorative designs and patterns suitable for interior decoration. He was no doubt alluding to the work of Margaret Preston, Thea Proctor, Dorrit Black, Grace Cossington Smith and others who did not choose the prescribed academic subject matter of pastoral scenes and female nudes or the methods and materials of male genre painting. His comments also show his distaste for design, decoration and pattern, which could be construed also to include needlework, or 'women's work'. At that time the highest praise that could be given to a woman painter was that her work looked as if it had been painted by a man.

Macdonald's comment that modern art was the result of a conspiracy between incompetent women artists and 'pansies' was in hindsight also ironically complimentary because he admitted that women were successfully operating outside the establishment, creating modern contemporary work

²⁵Topliss, 1996 pp 38 and 39.

from within their own designated areas of decoration and pattern, and thumbing their noses at conservative art academia.

Australian artist Margaret Preston, who was at the forefront of the arts and crafts movement in Australia, followed its ideals, which she combined with modernist investigation in design via Post Impressionism. The connection that Post Impressionism had with the arts and crafts movement is perhaps the common language that existed for both. 'Decoration' and 'Design' had a commonality with both, and women were the most enthusiastic followers of the arts and crafts movement. The dedication to still life also related to the reappraisal of floral subject matter in design which became a key element in the arts and crafts. Margaret Preston's subject matter explored Australian flora and fauna in her woodcuts, monoprints and paintings. She emphasised the importance of design in all her lectures and was a strong advocate of an Australian national art formed by its own environment. An early example of this can be seen in her *Teapot with Boiling Billies and Gumtree design* (Fig. 4).

Humphrey McQueen writes that Margaret Preston's modernism was based on her life-long concern with crafts. He cites the example of pottery and basketweaving which she developed while teaching at a military hospital in England during World War I. Because there was almost no money or equipment at that hospital everything had to be made from local materials or from scraps. The clay was dug locally, wheels and kilns were made on the premises. The materials for basketweaving came from local materials.

Dyeing was done using sorrel or white iris bulbs. It was at this time she learned to do monotypes. McQueen notes that what was common to all these crafts and important to her progress towards Modernism was the constant improvisation and the solutions she had to come up with to solve the daily difficulties at this time. Preston believed her craft work helped her to realise that it was what lay underneath that mattered.²⁶

Preston was aware of modernist practice and very vocal in its theory applied to her work. In 1929 she wrote :

*Why there are so many tables of still life in modern painting is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be solved.*²⁷

Essentially though, the judgement at this time of what was considered high art, modern design and decoration, could be ascertained by the attitude of Australians to modern home appliances and furnishings. Large department stores such as David Jones, Farmers, Grace Brothers and Anthony Horderns in Sydney all had art galleries on their top floors which promoted mostly traditional Australian landscape paintings. On the lower floors of their stores, modern appliances, clothing and interior design were offered. Women's magazines promoted the arrival of the latest modern technology, including the latest furnishing and dress fabrics which could acceptably be

²⁶ McQueen, 1979, p.151.

²⁷ aphorism 46 in S.Ure Smith (ed), *Margaret Preston:Recent Paintings*, Sydney Ure Smith, Sydney, 1929. Butler, 1987, p. 322 ,

printed with Cubist designs. But if this same image was contained in a painting on a gallery wall, it would be condemned and laughed at.²⁸ Sonia Delaunay's Cubist fabric designs along with her Ophist paintings were exhibited in Paris in the Arts Decoratifs exhibition of 1925. In the same year a photograph of her exhibit was featured in *Home* magazine in Sydney.²⁹ The paradox of Australian acceptance of chic European Art Deco fabric design for interior furnishing and dress fabric and its non acceptance of home grown 'art' depicting the same imagery demonstrates the complexity of Australia's cultural isolation and social conservatism.³⁰ An interesting Australian example is Kathleen O'Connor who on a visit home from Paris during 1926-27 worked for Grace Brothers and David Jones in Sydney hand-painting plates, sunshades and fabric. Her hand-painted velvet panel with silk end-pieces shoulder wrap of the mid-1920s shows a free abstract design in floral motif.³¹

²⁸E. Butel, *Margaret Preston*, Viking in association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985, pp.26-27.

²⁹Grace Cochrane, *The Craft Movement in Australia, A History*, NSW University Press, NSW, 1992, pp. 30-31. The 1925 Exposition International des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes exhibition marks the beginning of the rise of the influence of Modernist designers. Cochrane writes that a number of Australians who stayed on from the 1924 Wembley Empire exhibition in London visited the exhibition and that some subsequent Australian work, particularly textile design and production, can be traced to the influence of this event.

³⁰ McQueen, 1979, p.143 McQueen cites Norman Lindsay's refusal to exhibit with M.Preston until some restraint was exercised over her crude colour, particularly the 'chintz pattern stuff' which he saw as impossible in any art exhibition and 'destructive to all harmonic relations in colour'

³¹J. Gooding, *The Art of Kathleen O'Connor*, an Art & Australia Book published in association with the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1996, pp. 90-93.

In a 1928 edition of 'The Home' in *Art and Australia* the caption reads
'Modernism has reached Australia "The Home" reflects the Modern Spirit of Australia'.

Margaret Preston's woodcut designs and paintings fitted within acceptable 'interior decoration' parameters which made her work commercially acceptable, yet at the same time she theorised on the aesthetics of modernism in art. She believed that 'Art, to fulfil its destiny, requires to be accepted by a nation or race and not by a few only'.³²

She achieved this acceptance, as many of her woodcuts were used as cover illustrations for women's magazines, such as *Australia National Journal*, *Woman's World*, *Wentworth Magazine* as well as *Art in Australia*.

Contemporary critics of Margaret Preston labelled her work 'decorative' and considered her a mere flower painter. Although Preston brought several Art Deco touches into her work as experimentation, her reputed decorativeness cannot be translated into Art Deco. Preston's more obvious borrowings helped her to explore the spiral in art and nature, and to identify the peculiarly Australian elements of native plants.³³

Humphrey McQueen believes that too careful a consideration of Margaret Preston's work raises some difficult questions about Modernism in Australia

³²McQueen, 1979, p.146.

³³McQueen, 1979, p.143.

between the wars. Was there any? and if so, Was Preston it? He believed that not enough exploration was done by her contemporary art critics to specify the ways in which her knowledge was applied in her own work and that she remains an anomaly in the cataloguing process that passes for art history.³⁴ Roger Butler believes, however, that since the 1970s too much attention has been paid to her *Still Life*, (Fig 8) which has given Preston an undeserved reputation as a Modernist artist, and that the source of inspiration for this work was Fernand Leger.³⁵ Butler mentions also that perhaps Preston may not have been making major statements about the release of women from the drudgery of housework but rather may simply have been bringing her paintings and prints into line with her ideas about colour and composition. My view on the similarity of Preston's 1927 *Still Life* to Leger's *Still Life* is that his work irritated her with its dish of fruit resembling breasts and that her painting responded by replacing all references to female form with kitchen utensils.

Helen Topliss also disputes McQueen's single-mindedness regarding Margaret Preston's prominence in the development of Modernism, noting that his appraisal of her work is from a standard historical viewpoint. Topliss writes that up until the 1990s, whenever women artists, as in the case of Margaret Preston, have been given critical notice, their work has been taken out of its intellectual and creative context, ignoring the artistic network linking Australian women artists and the contribution of enhanced

³⁴McQueen, 1979, p.144.

³⁵Butler, 1987 p.48, attributes Terry Smith of the Power Institute, Sydney, to the discovery of the source for this painting.

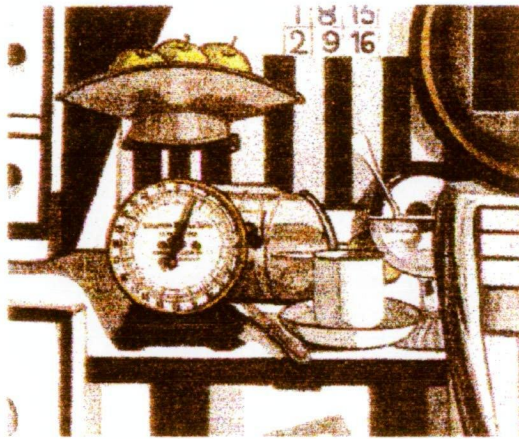


Figure 8. Margaret Preston, *Still Life* 1927. Location unknown.

consciousness achieved through the women's emancipation movement. Since McQueen's writing of 1979, the deconstruction movement in art history has involved the suspension and disruption of the recognised cultural hierarchies and enabled a new approach which has overturned accepted traditions.³⁶ Nevertheless, despite deconstructive analysis, Preston's work still remains as the best documented example of the evolution of modern art and theoretical practice for the period. Apart from her own writings on art published almost every year between 1916 and 1949,³⁷ there are innumerable journal and newspaper articles and monographs written about her that span her entire career.

Robert Hughes mentions an editorial in *Art in Australia*, 'A New Vision of Australian Landscape' which describes the kind of art that was happening in 1926 as 'simplification and reduction to essentials'.³⁸

Hughes notes that the development of art at this time was two-pronged : academics required precise recording of landscape, while non-academics sought precision of design and looked towards Post-Impressionism by selecting some elements and rejecting others to produce an effect not fully expressive in the landscape. He names Roland Wakelin, Roy de Maistre and Margaret Preston in the second category. Hughes believed that 1927 was the year that Post-Impressionism got a firm hand-hold in Sydney and also in

³⁶Topliss, 1996, pp.11-12.

³⁷Butler, 1987, pp. 322-333.

³⁸Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, 2nd edn, Penguin Books, Victoria, 1970, pp.88-89.

that year Margaret Preston became interested in the machine age and produced a kind of 'kitchen-sink purism'. Preston changed her palette to greys and blacks and experimented with Cubism, with interplays of sharp triangles, anticipating Sydney's experiments in geometrical abstraction during the 1940s (see Fig. 8) and Fig.9) Hughes says that owing to the previous popularity of her decorative flowerpieces of 1921-1926 her work was immediately accepted.

It is interesting to compare Olive Cotton's black and white photograph *Tea Cup Ballet* of 1935 (Fig. 10) with Margaret Preston's *Implement Blue* of 1927 (Fig. 9). Both artists have composed cups and saucers in a diagonal pattern casting long shadows which become an integral part of the composition.

For many talented women who contributed to the development of early 20th Australian modernism it was to take half a century for their work to gain recognition. Photographer Olive Cotton had to wait 60 years for her first solo exhibition. Clarice Beckett's first exhibition was a memorial in 1936, a year after her death at age 48 in 1935. She was forgotten until the 1970s when some of her work was found in a shed. Recently an exhibition of a large part of her surviving work was shown in Politically Incorrect a retrospective touring exhibition organised by the Ian Potter Museum of Art, which travelled around Australia from 1999, until May 2000.



Figure 9. Margaret Preston, *Implement Blue*, 1927, Art Gallery of New South Wales.

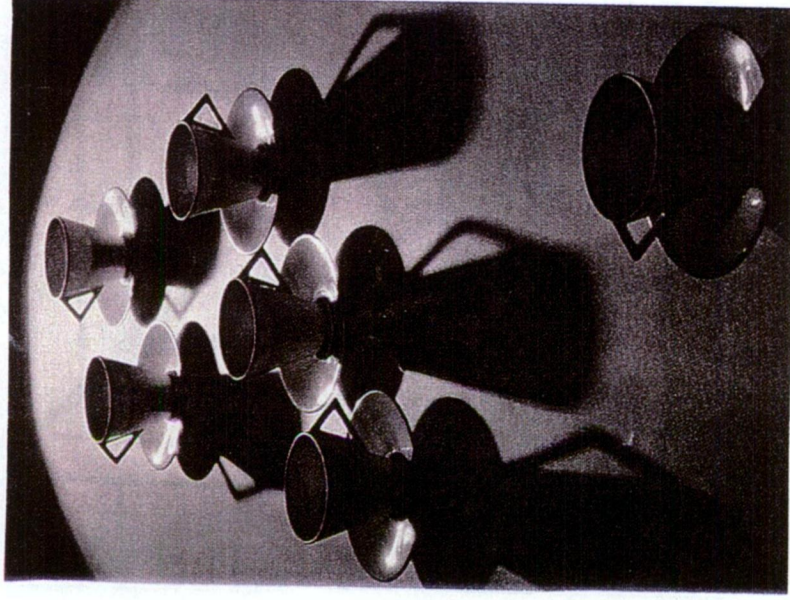


Figure 10. Olive Cotton *Tea Cup Ballet*, 1935, silver gelatin print.

Christopher Allen raises questions about modernism, Australian painting and the mechanisms by which artists are either acknowledged and established or ignored. There may be several reasons why Clarice Beckett was neglected for so long and perhaps some reflection on other women artists also. The conjunction of her early death in 1935 plus the style she practised, (which owed much to Max Meldrum), was overtaken by the Angry Penguins, Australia's first real avant-garde movement.³⁹

The lack of acknowledgement of the contribution of women to Australian art pre-1950 is illustrated by an exhibition in 1962⁴⁰ *Antipodean Vision*, which travelled to the Tate Gallery, London and the National Gallery in Ottawa, Canada. It also had two shows in Australia. The catalogue was divided into three sections, Colonial, Impressionist and Contemporary. The purpose of the exhibition, according to Sir Robert Menzies who wrote the foreword for the catalogue, was to mount a comprehensive show of Australian art in London. Yet reading through this catalogue and the illustrations I noted that there were 24 illustrations in colour of works, all by male artists. Of the additional 24 illustrations in black and white there were four reproductions of women's paintings, all of which were much smaller in size than any of the male artists' work. In this survey exhibition there were no works by women pre-1950 included in the Contemporary section.

³⁹C. Allen 'The lonely but familiar places of Clarice Beckett', *Art Monthly* June 1999, no. 120, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰C. Turnbull, E. Young & D. Thomas, *Antipodean Vision* published by F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962. Works for the exhibition were selected by members of the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board consisting of Sir William Ashton, Sir Daryl Lindsay, William Dargie, Russell Drysdale, Robert Campbell and Douglas Pratt.

While Margaret Preston, Olive Cotton, Kathleen O'Connor and other women artists were producing work which represented the pinnacle of visual art in Australia, it was left to women of independent means and single women to develop as professional artists and to choose the subject matter of their work. Married women with families were rarely given the opportunity to extend their creativity beyond needlework and home decoration which, although not defined as art, remained the major creative activity in the early decades of the 20th century. They produced such items as embroidered doilies, tablecloths, aprons, crocheted milk jug covers, doilies, tablecloths, rag floor rugs, bedspreads and knitted objects such as tea cosies, which all provided a functional product. The predominant motif on needlework items for the home was floral. Surface decoration on items often indicated their use, i.e. kitchen craft items referring to 'tea making'. The emblems of these domestic items continued an arts and crafts tradition.

It can be recognised that the ethos and history of Australian women's domestic creativity evolved from the space of domestic life which developed into a genre claimed by women as their own.

WHITE²

The medium of needlework within a domestic framework contains within it a history of women's creativity. This is the focus of my exhibition. I have used white fabric and mixed media in the majority of the pieces to project a connection to a utilitarian past.

The action of constraining the natural flow of textile and placing it in another context within a confined neat space, is a metaphor for women's place in domesticity and art history. The square format demonstrates a binary of cold/machine aesthetic versus its contents - nature/nurture.

Kasimir Malevich's white square and its associated rhetorical manifesto became a focus of interest to me because it represented clearly the momentum of the early machine-age aesthetic, as it veered away from the natural world towards abstraction.¹ His white square also represents the 'white door' through which much of the 20th century's high modernism progressed, linked through architecture.² Crone and Moos believe that Malevich's creative processes terminated five centuries of tradition in painting.³

¹R. Crone & D. Moos, *Kazimir Malevich* 1991 The authors propose that Malevich sought to eliminate the conceptions that linked humanity to a narrative called life and that he created a fundamental disruption where he was able to catapult his commentary away from foundations in nature into the realm of technique and creation alone.

²Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1962, p.167. Malevich began experimenting in 1915 in three dimensional idealised architectural drawings. With the culmination of Suprematist painting in 1918, he virtually gave up painting, except to illustrate his theories on art, and concentrated on producing architectural three dimensional sculptures.

³Crone & Moos, 1991, p.3.

The Russians saw the machine as a liberating force, freeing man from the oppression of nature, and with it a possibility of creating an entirely man-made world, with man as the master. This view of the machine as a liberating force was one explanation for the joyful welcome given to the Bolshevik regime a few years later - a regime with a new society transformed by the machine and by industrialisation. This romanticism of the machine lies at the base of all the 'isms' in art and literature which identified with the revolution and in particular the aesthetic of Constructivism.

However in Australia in the first decades of the 20th century the move towards acceptance of a machine aesthetic was slow and reactionary and one of the stumbling blocks to its progress was its association with Communism which was seen as evil. The first moves towards an Australian Modernism was essentially driven by women but their unique contribution to a new modernist interpretation of art was largely ignored for some decades because its progress was measured against a European/American yardstick.⁴ Their genre of domestic subject matter was still considered within the framework of women's work and too 'decorative' to be considered serious art.

My response to a machine - aesthetic is not entirely serious because I see it as rather ironic that white lace is now machine - made, its patterns are predominantly copied from *floral* Victorian handmade lace and its manufacture is usually in a non western country. The majority of this 'lace' is curtain material and there is an amazingly wide range of floral designs to

⁴Contributing factors to this omission were various but among them were the influence that European arrivals brought to Australia pre World War II, the dominance of American art theory, the Australian cultural cringe and perhaps the emergence of a new generation of young male artists.

choose from. Added to this, white *plastic* lace designs are also copied from 19th and early 20th century patterns, and manufactured in non-western countries. Currently there is a resurgence of interest in and manufacture of white embroidery inserts for clothing, which I have sourced for some of my work. Doilies 'handmade' in cutwork and ribbon lace style are imported cheaply from Asia, while original Australian doilies and needlework from the Art Deco era are gaining in value and prestige as anonymous antique objects, with an added tinge of nostalgia for a time when women produced these items by hand in the home.

My choice of textile/stitch as imagery was not an easy one because I feel that to confine it to a structured form compromises its inherent tactility. The nature of textile is that it flows, moves, drapes and forms a close alliance with human existence.

Making my visual work took two directions: first, in drawings which investigated the possibilities of stitch as imagery; second, the concept of a white textile interior contained in a square acting in opposition to the soft tactility of textile/stitch, which could be seen as a metaphor for women.

The first images aimed to translate stitch as imagery to abstract line drawing, black on white paper. Further abstraction reversed the black line to white on black paper.

I made three series of drawings. The first extended simple stitch line into enlarged embroidery stitch and dressmaking patterns, using chalk and white

conte on black paper which were not successful either in outline or the medium of chalk.

In the second series the images chosen were those with the most ambiguity and the medium was changed to white conte and blue tailors' chalk on black paper. The results were an improvement on previous drawings, because the medium produced a sharper cleaner line, and became an important aesthetic starting point that led to other possibilities for visual exploration of stitch as an image.

The third series of drawings, unlike the previous two, celebrates the decorative and ordered patterns of embroidery and functional stitch. The small scale of these drawings (measuring 7.5 cm square) helped me to visualise the grid structure as a tool and its significance in design/decorative elements. While these small drawings were basically thumbnail sketches, they had an important impact on the progress and direction of the next stages of my work. The drawings are represented in book form and their intimate scale acts as a reference guide to the boxed wall pieces (Fig.11).

My white square was born as a format of a wooden 22 cm square stretched with canvas and domestic fabric as a reference to artists' canvas. The basis of this idea was to include women's work with its decorative element in a machine aesthetic and to absorb my background as a painter, working with textile. The square chosen is lap-size; it references the intimate scale of women's needlework and its floral emblem overlays hint at its origins.

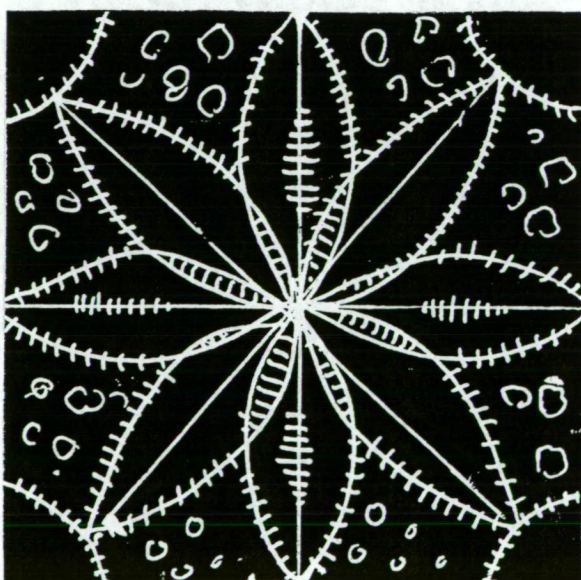
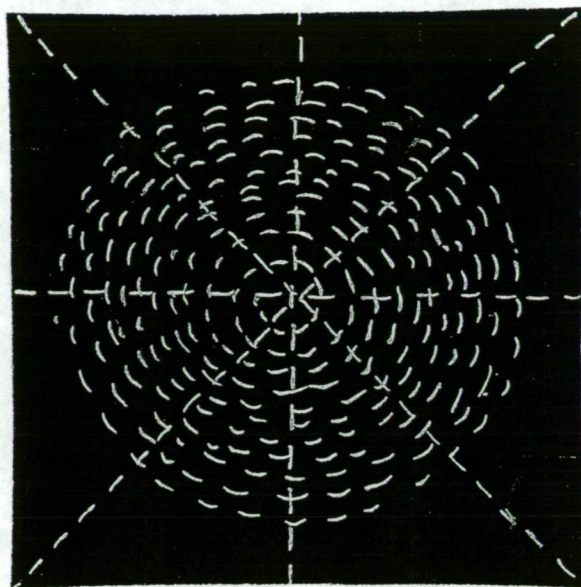


Figure 11. Edna Broad *Stitch*, 1999, selected drawings, white ink on black post-it pads.

Selections of white fabric such as calico, sheeting, satin, cotton and polyester cloth were stretched onto the wooden frames. Functional embroidery and dressmaking stitches were sewn onto the cloth and then painted over with white paint to further the analogy between women and modernism. This simple idea led further visual investigation which sought to emphasise the opposition between a square and the soft tactility of textile and stitch. The difficulty associated with making this work was in resolving the relationship between the square and its textile/tactile overlay.

Still based on the square frame, the tension between the square and its overlay was altered. To emphasise softness I used various fabrics with padded surfaces with underlays of wadding and cotton filling as used in quilting and cushions. Experimentation followed, using many types of squares within squares, textured layers and dressmaking references.

While investigating the 22 cm square wooden stretcher base, I also worked with small, intimately scaled boxed textile pieces in varying sizes. Working with these small-scale pieces allowed another perspective on the possibilities of using different materials effectively. They suggest containers for personal sewing and jewellery items because of their size. Items such as sewing boxes were once popular with women and often very beautifully made, which reflected the value placed on their contents.

My investigation expanded to include circles and rectangles within the structure of the square, with opposing textures, such as feathers, surrounding a square box; I used white stretch-velvet covering a padded circle within a

box to suggest a pin cushion. Some materials used were machine made-lace, paper doilies, curtain fabric, cord, ric-rac binding, wedding veil, satin, polyester/cotton, muslin, beads, sequins, safety pins, buttons, measuring tapes, etc. In some cases three or four different fabrics were layered in individual pieces, to emphasise the effect of white on white. The incorporation of vinyl lace added another layer of interpretation : industrial vinyl is designed and extruded using the imagery of women's Victorian lacework and sold commercially by the metre, alongside fabric curtaining, tablecloths and domestic linen.

White selvage, the waste edge from cloth manufactured by James Nelson's textile factory in Mowbray, Launceston, is a material I have used extensively. The subtle colour and texture variations produced by the different grades of cloth are enhanced when the selvage is knitted.⁵ The notion of recycling fabric fits well into the early traditional Australian pioneer women's ethos of 'making do'. I feel that my white knitted selvage 'rugs' have a connection to wagga rugs and to knitted woollies, while the time-consuming preparation of the selvages into useable knitting balls echoes a time past when knitting wool came in loosely twisted 'hanks' that had to be wound into balls, often from the back of a chair or someone's willing outstretched hands holding the looped wool.⁶

⁵The edges formed by knitting are also known as 'selvages' and refer to the casting-on, casting-off, binding and edge stitches which form the perimeter of a knitted object and there are around 20 variations of methods to form a selvage.

⁶Mary Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Knitting Book*, Dover Publications, London, 1972. This edition, is an unabridged re-publication of the original 1938 edition published by Hodder & Stoughton, London, pp.36-37. A small cartoon illustrates a woman winding wool from a cow's horns into a ball with the title 'Winding wool pre-flood.'

The results of my knitting of the white textile selvaqe waste produced clumsy knitted white 'rugs' which are deliberately enhanced in their awkwardness by using large knitting needles and mismatching the selvages colours and textures.

As I progressed further I investigated squares and spheres, images of Modernism, and experimented by enclosing squares and circles within the knitted selvaqe pieces. While the spheres were relatively easy to cover with the fabric the squares were not suited to this treatment and white net curtain material was an alternative choice. After deliberation on the results I concluded that while the idea was sound the materials for its representation were problematic and several months were to pass before I found materials that provided a workable solution.

Meanwhile I returned to an equally important and time-consuming area of my visual research which was to construct a container to enclose the white textile imagery. Rather than being merely a frame for the work, this also had to represent physical and aesthetic opposition to its contents.

My involvement in the making of all the elements, including the metal frames, reflects an interest in mixed media and its cross-pollination of ideas as well as in learning new skills. It also alludes to women in the arts and crafts movement of 100 years ago where it was not unusual for them to work in a broad spectrum of different materials from sewing to metalwork.⁷

⁷For instance leatherwork was a widespread craft which produced such items as frames and letter holders; metal repousse, using copper and brass, was also popular; and dishes, plaques and spoons were popular items. China painting was a favourite pastime because of its relevance to the home.

An aluminium frame was the option that I felt best suited a machine aesthetic.⁸ Two prototypes were constructed and evaluated. The measurements of the face plate for the frame were initially worked out on a PROCAD computer drawing system attached to an Amada stencil machine which stamps out the aluminium plate.

Thirty frames were made. Each of these were constructed⁹ from the stamped stencil plate as the front face of the frame, with aluminium strip and angle edging over a wooden frame. Each aluminium face plate had to be filed to remove the stencil burr connections both on the outer and inner edge and polished to give a smoother finish.

I found aluminium a difficult material to work with in some respects because its surface can be scratched so easily and does not retain a polished surface. It has none of the refinement or cold beauty of stainless steel. Advantages in the use of aluminium are its relative cheapness and its softness which allowed a choice of surface finish of my frames. Sand-blasting was the surface treatment I eventually chose.

Aluminium has developed a dubious reputation. This arose from its use in cooking ware and teapots, where the aluminium leached into the food, providing scientists with a theory of neurotoxicity associated with

⁸ The Aluminium Industry in Australia <http://www.aluminium.org.au/npi/Rep2>. Aluminium is used in industrial processes such as the manufacture of alloys, window frames, engine parts, aircraft parts, roofs, electric wires etc. and is Australia's second largest export industry, behind coal. Australia is the world's largest producer of alumina and the fifth largest producer of aluminium generating in excess of 6 billion dollars in export earnings.

⁹ I consider them to be constructed because of the process of first making a 'stretcher' frame support for the fabric, then a separate wooden base frame which supports the outer aluminium frame made from three separate parts.

Alzheimer's disease and Parkinsonism-dementia.¹⁰ As a result most cooking pots used today are stainless steel, cast iron, or coated non-stick metal. Likewise teapots are usually ceramic or stainless steel.

The configuration of my work connects all components to each other by an oppositional relationship of materials. The soft tactility of textile is set against the prevailing organising structures of Modernism/Constructivism represented by the rigid aluminium square and cube.

As my work progressed, the process became one of paring down and reducing to essentials. With this in mind I decided to return to a more simple representation of a binary opposition, utilising a constructed open cube which was both an aesthetic as well as a theoretical solution to a foil for my textile floor pieces. Because of difficulty in finding a ready-made square cube, I constructed several test cubes made from aluminium angle, which provided the visual cue that I had been looking for as a counter for my knitted selvage squares. I decided that for the purpose of my installation I needed 'ready-made', machine-produced, impeccable cubes.

Locating 'ready-made' cubes was a time-consuming area of research which took in such diverse areas of industry as marine suppliers, shopfitters, aluminium fabricators and industrial structural suppliers. The Dexion Speedframe, available from a local shopfitter, met the requirement of a cube and comprised corners that interlocked and produced smooth joints.¹¹

¹⁰*Encyclopaedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (PE4969)
<http://www.uia.org/uiademo/pro/e4969.htm>

¹¹Dexion (Australia) Pty Ltd is owned by the Interlake Corporation, USA - an international organisation with a network of subsidiary companies, licensees and distributors throughout

At this point having found a workable cube structure, I returned again to the knitted selvage pieces and their relationship to the open cube structure. My original format for the knitted white selvage pieces was planned as a square based on Malevich's *White Square*. After trials of squares and rectangles I concluded that a rectangular shaped knitted 'rug' was more successful aesthetically. As with my aluminium framed wall series, the imperative is not the shape of the textile itself but rather the shape of the frame imposed upon it. Applying this rationale to the floor installation the aluminium open cube creates the square containment at its base where it meets the surface of the rug.

My work emphasises the opposition between the inner textile and the outer part of the metal construct but more importantly its square format represents the control, structure and imposition of the Modernist machine. This could be seen as a metaphor for women's creative work which was denigrated within the parameters of art history because it was derived from the domestic space. By juxtaposing these two diverse materials of textile and aluminium I enhance each material by the presence of the other. The white rectangular rugs on the wooden floor create a soft resting place for the aluminium cube which in turn reflects a greater presence because it acts as a foil for the structure of the cube. The rug requires human intervention for its creation from a machine by-product, through selectively processing it according to its innate qualities, in this instance its long lengths of thin strands, thus making it suitable for knitting. Its other inherent qualities are collective tactility and

the world. Dexion Speedframe is a square tube construction system with knock-together joints forming a strong smooth framework.

subtle colouration. On the other hand, the 12 cubes require direct machine reproduction for their identical appearance and human intervention through measurement and assembly of the aluminium components.

The anodised aluminium cube absorbs a measure of softness from the white knitted rug which surrounds and envelops its skeleton, but it nevertheless remains dominant because of its rigid form and its air of authority sanctified by its issue from a machine.

My work takes the form of an installation at Poimena Gallery situated in Launceston Church Grammar. This gallery offers both a white walled space as well as suggestion of the domestic interior with fireplaces, mantelpieces and homely-sized rooms. The polished wooden floor boards provide visual warmth for my installation which connects with the white knitted floor rugs upon which sit aluminium cubes (Figure 12).

In the adjacent room in the gallery opposite the floor installation there is reference to a shadow box which contains boxed textile objects (Figure 13). Around the room on the walls are 28 square aluminium-framed white textile pieces, reflecting the materials, methods and tools required for needlework.



Figure 12. Edna Broad *Cubes and Rugs*, 2000 anodised aluminium and textile

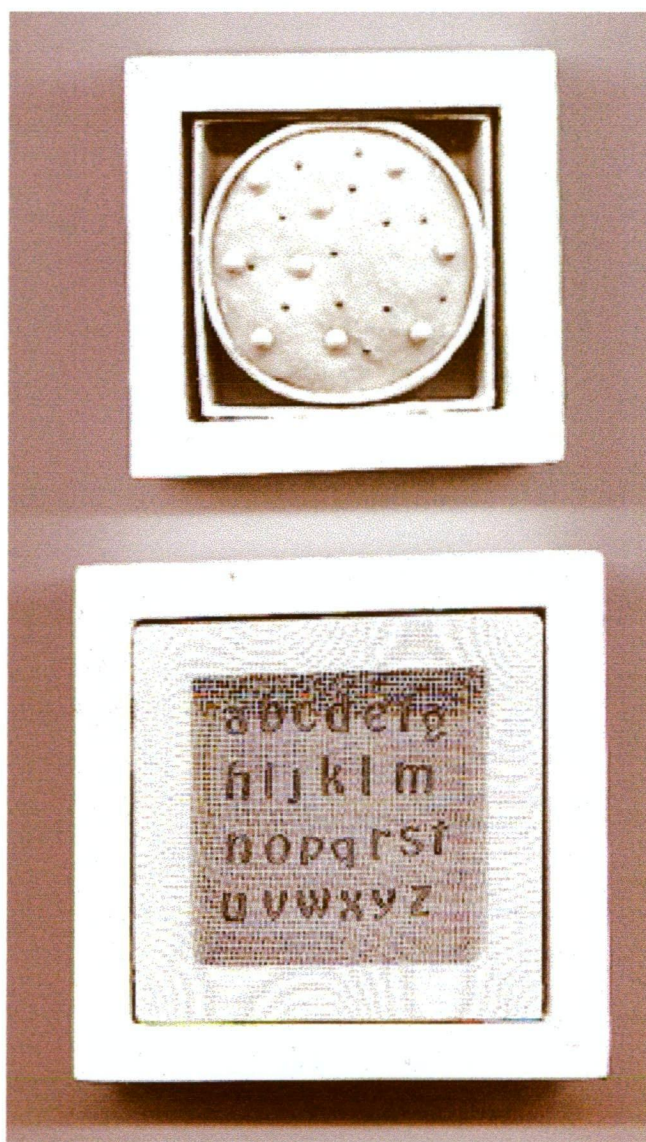


Figure 13. Edna Broad *Shadow Box* 2000, 16 small boxed textile pieces in shadow box (detail) *Pin cushion* (top), *Sampler* (bottom)

CONCLUSION

At the outset my research focused on personal family issues of place and identity and a journey that my family made to the Victorian goldfields during the goldrush period of the 1850s-1860s. While retracing this journey it became clear that a study of the creative pursuits of pioneer women between 1800 and 1890 was essential to provide an historical background and context for evaluation. I found that there were more substantial examples of artefacts and written commentary from the later generation of women than in the early period of colonial development. The most compelling reasons are that there was a scarcity of women in the Colony and the living conditions were harsh, which precluded the survival of much domestic art before 1850. Descendants of this generation were also more likely to discard utilitarian items of domestic art which were made from non-traditional materials and seen as less 'acceptable'.¹ Women's domestic arts from the next generation which reflected style, gentility or skill, such as crocheted white work, were more likely to be kept.

When defining women's creativity during this period I consider that needlework was a basic skill passed on from mother to daughter and the most widely practised craft in the 19th century in Australia.² It was an important activity which applied to the day-to-day functioning of the household and formed the basis of their creative activity. The lack of quality textile materials, poverty and isolation in the colonies saw the emergence of a frugal resourcefulness. Needlework skills were used to make rag rugs, bedspreads, children's clothes, aprons and other utilitarian objects out of worn and

¹For instance, seed pods made into pin-cushions.

²C. Miley, *Beautiful & Useful*, 1987, p.44.

reworked fabrics. While these items were made to be functional, they were also highly creative because of added dimension of decorative elements of embellishment often derived from the local Australian environment. This ethos of making do became part of the Australian way of life for most women.

At the turn of the century, two events occurred which changed the focus of Australian women's creativity: the women's emancipation movement and the influences of the English arts and crafts movement. *The Studio*, a journal widely available in Australia, helped spread the ideas of the English arts and crafts movement along with financially independent Australian women who went to London and enrolled in various courses. The philosophies they brought back to Australia were introduced into their work. Arts and crafts societies were formed in every State during the early decades of the 20th century. The Australian elite inner circle of educated middle class women, who worked with the key male figures, dominated exhibitions and acted as office bearers of the societies. The first Australian Society was formed in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1903 instigated by associates of the Hobart Technical School (the forerunner of the Hobart TAFE Institute). The formation of these societies came about because of the limited venues available to talented amateurs of the applied arts and their desire to show their work to the public.

In 1907 the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work was held and attracted thousands of entries from Australia and overseas, revealing the range and quality of women's work. I propose that the arts and crafts movement had an important influence on the way that a design-based Modernism emerged in Australia. The print revival associated with the arts and crafts movement saw women artists such as Margaret Preston, Dorrit Black and Ethel Spowers begin to experiment with printmaking techniques studied and observed during

overseas visits. The resurgence of interest in ancient Japanese woodblock printing techniques initially exerted the strongest influence on their work, followed by the aesthetics of Post-Impressionism. In the case of Margaret Preston, emphasis was on still life and related to a re-appraisal of Australian floral subject matter in design, chosen because of its absence of narrative. Still life became a basis for experimentation in stylisation and abstraction relying on colour and design. Popular magazines of the time featured the prints of artists such as Spowers, Black and Preston and the watercolours of Thea Proctor and their designs were featured on the covers of magazines, such as *The Home*. Their images of still life and domestic subjects gained public approval because they reflected modern design that was compatible with contemporary interior decoration. While women led the way in the development of modern design at this time through the use of their own genre of domesticity, they 'feminised' Modernism, but triggered criticisms that their work was not art but decoration.

My conclusion was that the constant of women's creative history in this study remained the domestic genre. While this genre provided women with a 'laboratory table' for experimentation with modernism,³ its historical association with 'amateur' and 'craft' and disassociation from the avant garde prevented their work from being worthy of serious consideration or documentation in art history. Within the time span of my period of study the role of women within the domestic space was clearly defined and accepted. Today, however, it is clear that there are no demarcation lines between the creative work of men and women, with many male artists such as John Corbett, Brett Alexander and Patrick Snelling working in the area of fine art

³Cited in *Margaret Preston Recent Paintings* ed. Sydney Ure Smith Sydney, 1929, Aphorism No.46, R. Butler *The Prints of Margaret Preston*, 1987, p.322.

textiles. Post-industrialisation with its new technology and accompanying social change in Western society has initiated the collapsing of gender role difference.

Using the constant of a domestic genre derived from my research, I utilised the imagery of a metal (aluminium) square and cube to represent an enclosure device for the domestic space. This square/cube containment is a metaphor for the organising structures of modernism/suprematism and directly references Kasimir Malevich's white on white square with its rhetorical theoretical subjectivity (Fig.4).

The presence of textile as a filling or centre within the aluminium square/cube sets up a binary of woman/soft/nature/nurture versus male/square/cold/machine aesthetic.

The initial inspiration for my project was the fine needlework handed down by women through their families, which has no maker's names or styles and remains, in most cases, undated, having lost its maker's identity. The uniting factor of the women's work in my research is the private, domestic nature of the subject matter, whether a still life, floral painting, or a piece of needlework. My visual work reflects in a metaphorical sense, the appropriation and merging of yesterday's hand made needlework ethos with machine technology. The underlying floral motif is present, as fabric or still life - it stands as an emblem of decoration, an emblem giving comfort and association to the last vestiges of a time past. Even if these emblems are plastic and machine-made, they still echo the domestic past, the interior and intimate space of women.

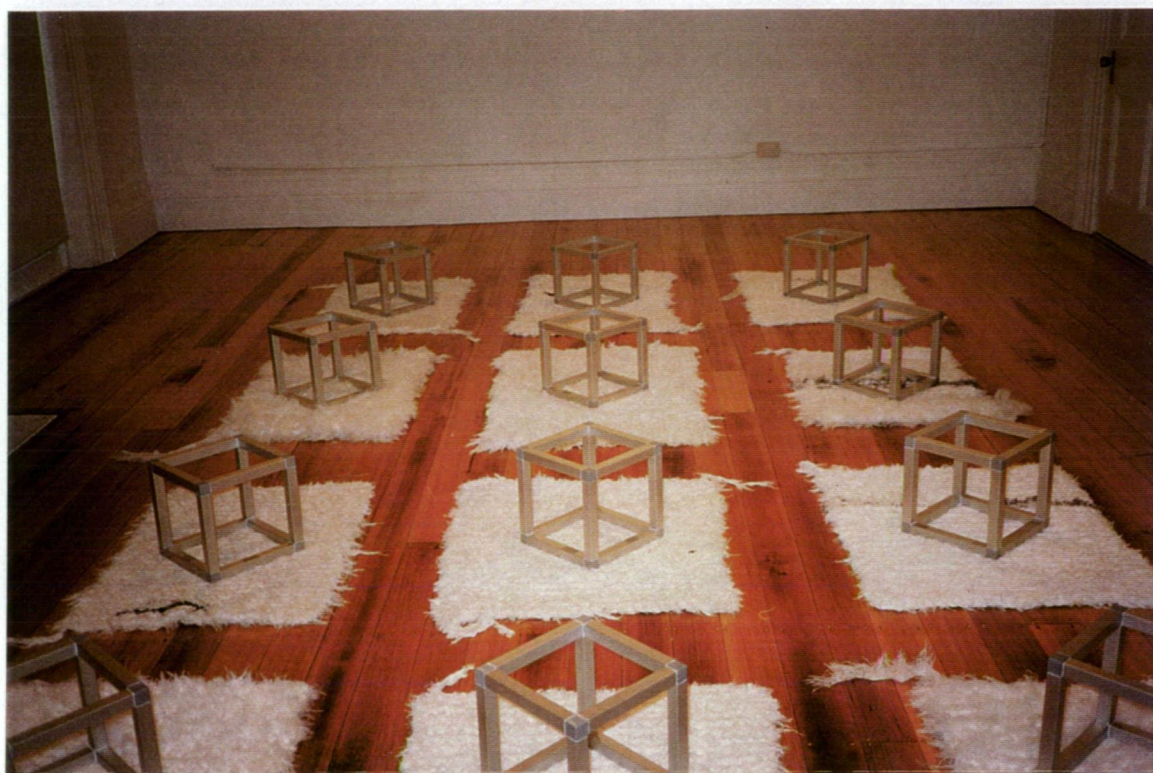
APPENDIX I

EXHIBITIONS PARTICIPATED IN SINCE COMMENCING MASTER OF FINE ART DEGREE IN 1997

- August, 2000 SYNERGY CENTRO -group show, 'Cafi Centro, St John Street, Launceston.
- June, 2000 THE TOOL SHOW - group show, The University Gallery B, University of Tasmania, Launceston.
- April, 1999 TRANSITIONS - solo exhibition - Gallery Two, Launceston.
- Oct 1998 ACAF6 ART FAIR, group show, Melbourne Exhibition Buildings.
- May 1998 3 X 3 group textile exhibition with Robyn Glade-Wright and Carla Crompton, Gallery Two, Bridge Street, Launceston.
- April, 1998 EATING OUT - plate exhibition, Rialto Gallery Restaurant, Burnie, Tasmania.
- Feb 1998 GROUP SHOW, Lanni's Gypsy Gallery, St John Street, Launceston.
- Dec 1997 CHRISTMAS SHOW, NISART Gallery, Margaret St. Launceston.
- June, 1997 THE BOX SHOW Travelling exhibition to Institut Teknologi Mara, Kuala Lumpur, and venues around Australia.
- April, 1997 TASMANIAN LIFESTYLE EXHIBITION, Hanku International, Osaka, Japan.

APPENDIX II

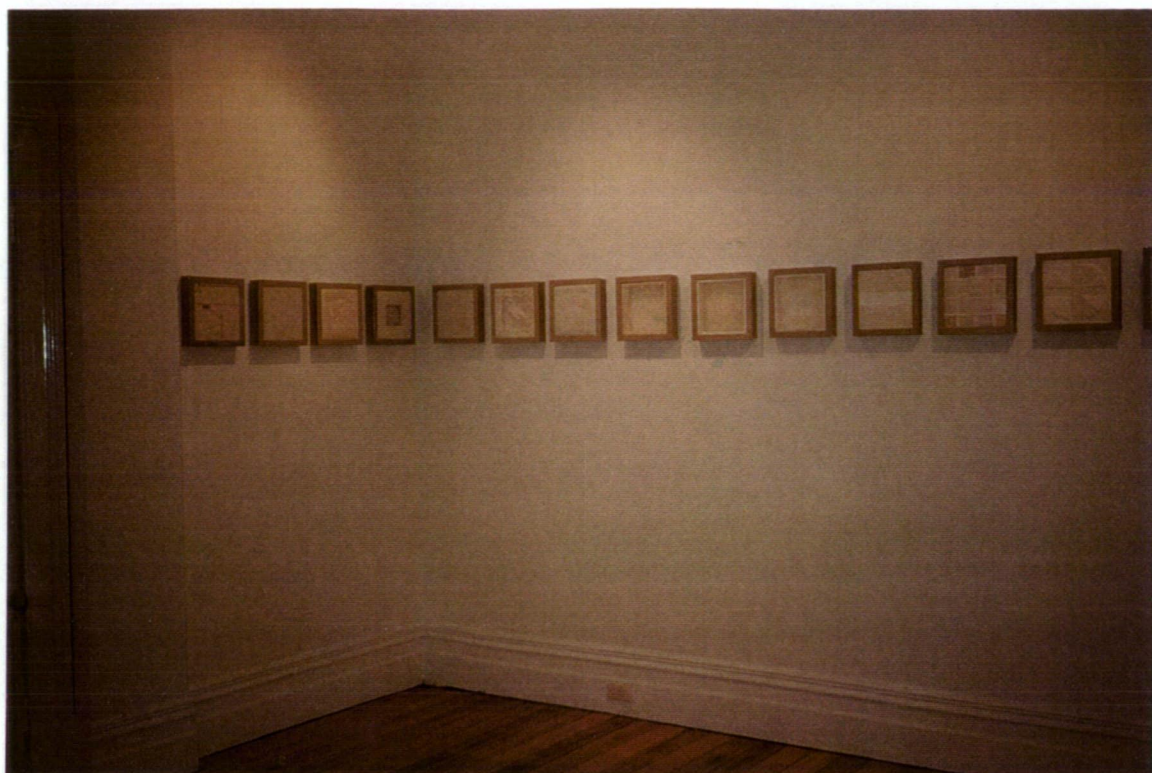
EXHIBITION OF ART WORK WHITE²
PRESENTED FOR ASSESSEMENT AT POIMENA GALLERY,
(LAUNCESTON CHURCH GRAMMAR SCHOOL, BUTTON
STREET, MOWBRAY, TASMANIA)
1 November, 2000



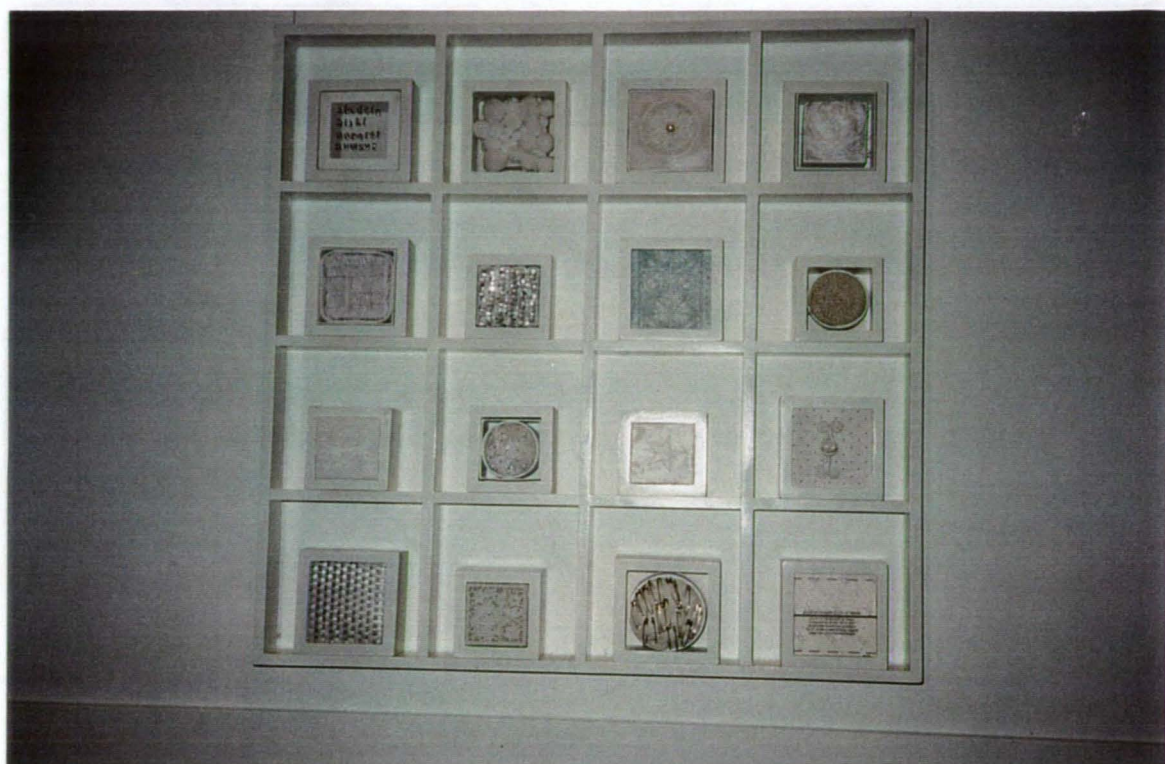
Rugs and Cubes 12 anodised Dexion cubes, 12 knitted polyester selvage
rugs



Rugs and Cubes 12 anodised Dexion cubes, 12 knitted polyester selvage
rugs (detail) 73



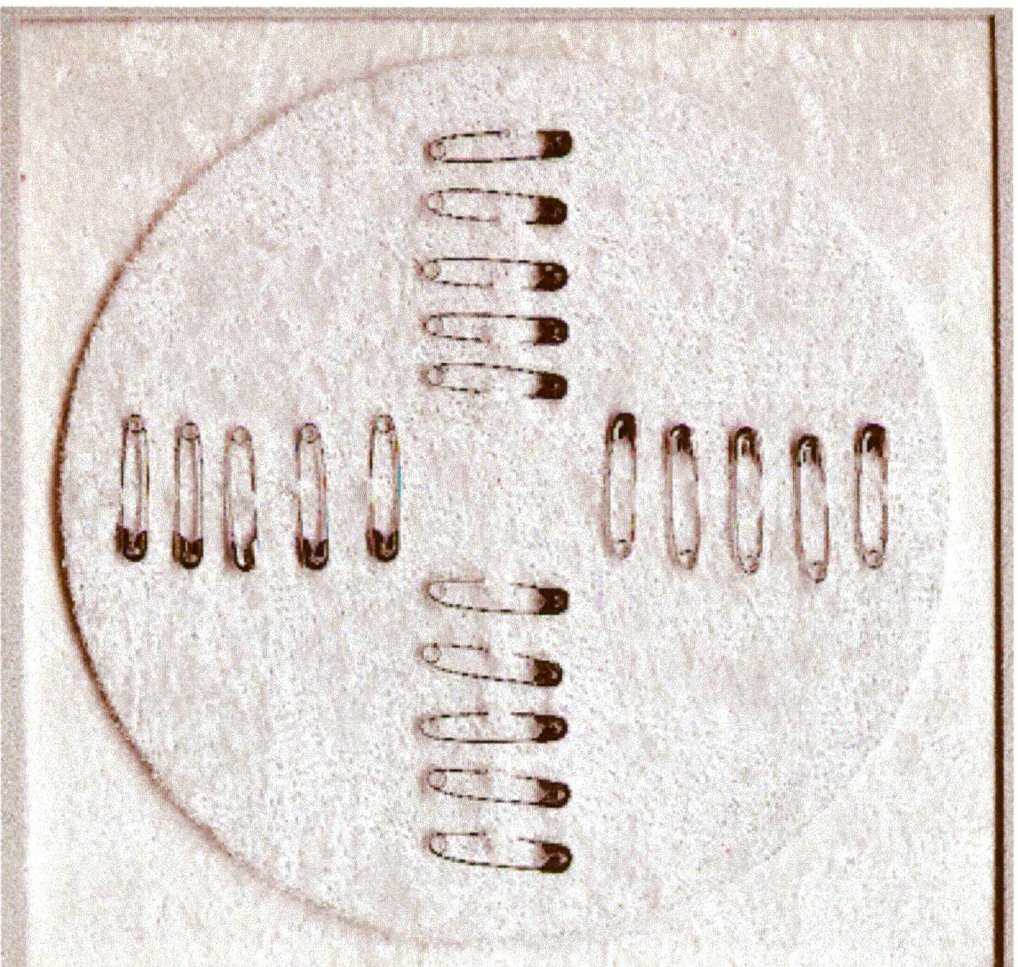
28 framed textile pieces 25 x 25 cm (sandblasted aluminium frames) and shadow box (71 x 71 cm) containing 16 small wooden framed textile pieces



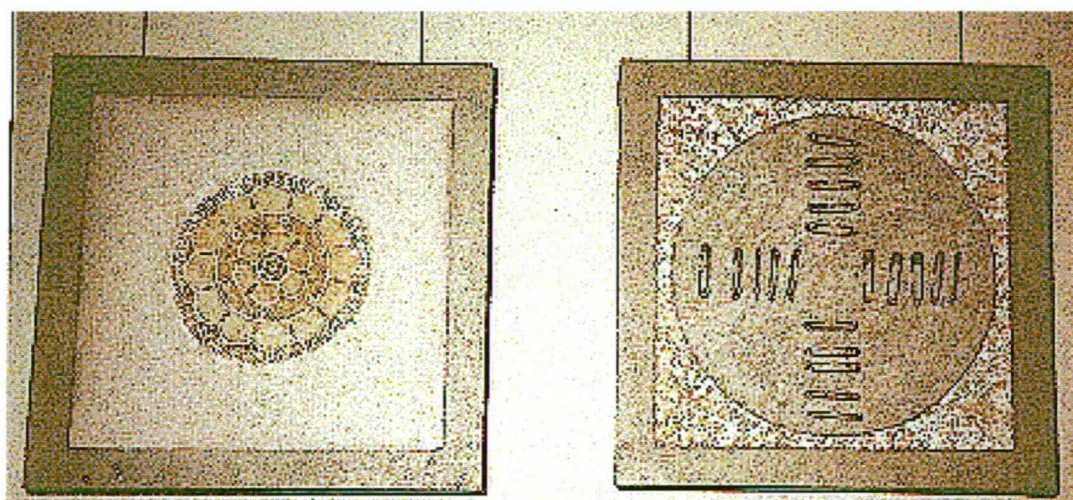
Shadow Box 16 small wooden framed textile pieces in white wooden frame
71 x 71 cm



Antique floral textile, plastic & braid, sandblasted aluminium 25 x 25 cm



Emergency tools Stretch velvet, safety pins, sandblasted aluminium 25 x 25 cm



Antique Floral (left)

Emergency Tools (right)



Bouquet Lace, lace appliqué, plastic lace, sandblasted aluminium 25 x 25
cm



Underpinned layered lace, pins, sandblasted aluminium 25 x 25 cm
79



Afternoon Tea Fabric, letters, sandblasted aluminium 25 x 25 cm
80

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Interviews

Interviews with my mother during November-December 1997, relating to specific family memories of Bendigo and the location of the family home, 1870-1920s.

Interview on 14 July 1997 with Geoff Duncombe, Campbell Town historian and author of *A History of Campbell Town*, relating to occupations of workers around the Campbell Town area during the period 1830 - 1850 and the social structure of the population.

Telephone conversation on 26 September, 1997 with Helen D. Harris, genealogical researcher, Melbourne, relating to methods and approaches to research regarding 19th century goldfields era in Bendigo.

Interview on 18 October, 1999 with Rosalie Smith of Invermay, Tasmania relating to her examination and identification of 19th and early 20th century white needlework in my collection.

Interviews on 4 February, 1997 and 4 March, 1997 with Glenda King, Curator of Craft, Queen Victoria Museum, at Macquarie House, Launceston, which at the time housed part of the collection of 19th century women's costumes.

Meeting on 6 March 1997 with Glenda King, Curator of Craft, Queen Victoria Museum, at the Queen Victoria Museum, where she gave me background information on an exhibition of women's needlework from the Museum's collection.

Interview on 28 October, 1997 with Laurel Johnson, proprietor of Montrose Cottage, Eureka Street, Ballarat Victoria, regarding goldfields costume and artefacts. She gave me permission to photograph rag rug (Fig. 1).

Interview on 29 October 1997 with volunteers from Buda House, Castlemaine, Victoria, regarding the collection of arts and crafts artwork made by the Leviny sisters for the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work 1907. Permission to photograph work.

Interview on 31 October, 1997 with Mrs Betty Read, 51 Belle Vue Road, Bendigo, relating to the location of the Corrie and Collis family home in Belle Vue Road.

Correspondence

Letter written on 9 January 1997 to Glenda King, Curator of Craft, Queen Victoria Museum, seeking access to the Queen Victoria collection relating to textile and clothing artefacts.

Letter written on 28 July, 1997 to Helen D. Harris, author of *Women on the Goldfields*, seeking a copy of her book.

Letter written on 4 November, 1997 to Mrs Betty Read, 51 Belle Vue Road, Bendigo.

Letter received on 5 December 1997 from Mrs. Betty Read, 51 Belle Vue Road, Bendigo, supplying information requested in my letter of 4 November, 1997.

Letter written on 5 November 1997 to Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society, Bendigo Library, Hargreaves Street - seeking information from Bendigo rate books from 1860s - 1924.

Letter received on 21 January 1998 from Pat Hocking, Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society, Bendigo Library, responding to my letter of 5 November, 1998, enclosing information obtained from the Bendigo ratebooks from 1864 - 1880.

Letter written on 2 December 1998 to Helen Ross, Lecturer, Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA.

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[The cover design differs from the original 1936 catalogue which featured a chronological flow chart of art movements.]

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